University of Alberta

Teaching and Learning Using a Child-Focused Approach in a Kindergarten Classroom in Montserrat

by

©

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Abstract

Kindergarten in Montserrat is part of the elementary school system where academic concerns usually overshadow other aspects of child development. As such, using play-based teaching strategies in classrooms is not the norm. Classroom discourse is often conducted in an orderly and structured manner where student participation is at the direction and discretion of the teacher. Most teachers operate as disciplinarians, classroom managers and knowledge transmitters delivering pre-planned subject-centred curricula while efficiently managing time and limited resources. The results of their efforts are measured through achievement tests.

This case study explored the experience of teaching in a public school kindergarten in Montserrat using a child-focused approach. This involved integrating the subjects of the curriculum using a variety of direct and indirect teaching approaches including play, and considering the children's interests in determining topics for study.

Three themes were identified in this situation that described our experience: celebrating learning, collaborating, and co-controlling. Students initiated celebration of their or their peers' accomplishments. The children's greater engagement with the curriculum provided a platform for collaboration between the teacher and students, with other students in the school, and the wider community. Participating within a social-constructivist learning environment, the children were engaged as co-controllers where the students and the teacher shared responsibility for classroom management. In this arrangement the teacher-researcher was also a learner and the students also teachers. Communication, integral to co-control and collaborative activities within the learning

environment, was initiated by all participants and was often a learning experience in conflict resolution, problem solving, compromise, debate and creativity.

Dedication

This dissertation, the result of four years of research, is dedicated to the links that connect my past and my future: my mother, the late Rhoda S. Burns, and my son, Shernyl C. Burns.

In addition to being my mother, Rhoda was also my father, advisor, counselor, body guard, lawyer, role model, spiritual advisor and friend. She taught me that through hard work, commitment and faith in God, dreams such as this can be accomplished.

Her sudden death just months before I began this journey forced Shernyl into the role as my constant support and confidant. He is the main reason why I couldn't give up even when the snow elephants rained on my parade.

Rhoda, I hope I am still making you proud and Shernyl, never ever give up.

Acknowledgement

Born the daughter of an unemployed single teenage mother in a rural village in Montserrat, becoming an academic way exceeded my childhood fantasy since my mother, Rhoda, was unable to access secondary education due to our family's economic background. This major feat is attributable to many who cannot all be listed here but who have been and will be thanked in other forums.

Through the encouragement and advice of Lady Eudora Fergus, Dr Donna ChinnFatt, and Mrs Daphne Cassell who was then Chief Training Officer, I was able to access a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship. Thank you ladies.

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Table of Contents

Page

CHAPTER 1 1

Statement of Problem 1

Purpose of the Study 1

Research Question 3

My Journey to Becoming a Teacher-Researcher 4

CHAPTER 2 8

The Island of Montserrat 8

Concepts of Childhood in Montserrat 9

Education in Montserrat 12

The Kindergarten Curriculum 16

Perspectives on Teaching and Learning 20

Direct and Indirect Approaches 20

Play-Based Perspectives 21

A Child-Focused Approach 24

Integrating Curriculum 25

Using Children's Interests 28

Toward a Child-Focused Educational Climate 29

CHAPTER 3 33

A Qualitative Inquiry 33

The Research Setting 36

Participants 37
Ethical Considerations 38
Role of the Researcher 40
Data Collection 42
  Written Sources 44
  Alternative Sources 46
  Informal Conversations 48
Data Analysis 48
Limitations of the Study 51
CHAPTER 4 55
A New Start 55
Brades School and the Kindergarten Classroom 55
Beginnings 66
Integrating Subjects and the Idea of Collage 78
Creating a Collage in Our Classroom 80
CHAPTER 5 88
  Celebrating Learning: Sharing Accomplishments 89
  Collaborating: Learning with Friends 90
  Co-controlling: We Are All Teachers and Learners 90
Thinking Within and Across Themes 93
Safety and Comfort Matters 100
Oops: Dictatorial or Democratic Teacher? 104
Flexibility Matters 107

Putting Me to the Test 113

Effective Collaborators 121

Pedagogical Documentation 123

Final Celebrations 123

The Children's Exit Reflection 126

Conclusion 128

CHAPTER 6 130

Recommendations 132

Administrators 132

Teachers 132

Curriculum Designers 134

Implications for Further Study 135

This is Not the End 136

References 139

Appendices 155

A. Montserrat Educational Institutions 156

B. Brades School Compound 158

C. Brades School Compound, Detailed View 160

D. Information Letters to Parent and Student 162

E. Research Consent Form for Students 166

F. Classroom Floor Plan 168

G. Extent for September, 2005 170

H. Sample Timetable Reflecting Subject Segmentation.. 173

I. Sample Timetable Including the Literacy Hour.. 175

J. Report Cards Used Prior to Academic Year 2001-2002.................................. 177

K. Report Cards Used from Academic Year 2002-2003 179

L. Excerpts from End of Term II Test, March 2006 182

List of Figures

Page

1. Teacher-researcher caught by a student making a note in researcher log/journal at "untidy" teacher table during break time. Classroom entrance door is to the right 45
2. Initial desk arrangement of rows facing the big chalkboard and small chalkboard layered with cork in the back of the classroom 57
3. Desks arranged in sets of four 58
4. Children playing on floor inside the desk arrangement 59
5. Children on rug inside desk arrangement doing floor puzzle 59
6. A few boys on the tiled floor making music with objects found in the classroom60
7. Children playing teacher-made game on the tiled floor without rug 61
8. Children playing on tiled floor 61
9. Library corner / writing area 62
10. Boys playing on top of the windowsill dressed in red and jeans on St Valentine's Day, 2006 63
11. Bulletin board display demonstrating the discovery of Montserrat with children's work displayed on adjacent walls 64
12. Children playing just outside of the classroom 65
13. Looking from west to east in the classroom 65
14. Bigger chalkboard at the front of the classroom 66
15. Girls playing school in September 74
16. Map showing coloured houses identifying where we lived on the island 76

17. September's bulletin board displaying photos of each class member including teacher 77

18. Figure 18. Student reviewing her phonics using plasticine 83

19. Figure 19. Student mounting her work on the classroom wall 91

20. Figure 20. Student voluntarily working on craft project with the teacher during break time 92

21. Her project looked similar to these despite not being in "perfect" halves 93

22. The children's brooches mounted on the wall in the classroom 96

23. Fire fighter father viewing his son's brooch 97

24. Child's drawing showing that being with others evokes happiness 112

25. Children collaborating during play. Play is a rare occurrence in local kindergarten classrooms 113

26. One student sharing his friend's desk in order to get assistance during a test.... 114

27. A first time kindergartner, assisting a repeater during testing 115

28. One student pointing out the other's mistake during a test 116

29. Children assuming positions not normally encouraged in classrooms in order to assist a classmate during testing 116

30. Student checking another's work only moments after she had corrected someone else's work 117

31. Local media personality, on behalf of the Montserrat Tourist Board exposing the children to some of Montserrat's National symbols 119

32. Police Officer talking with Students and answering their questions about his role in the community 119

33. Collaboration among the Kindergarteners to demonstrate their knowledge of National symbols using puppetry 120

34. Students collaborating with children from the other kindergarten class on an art project 120

CHAPTER 1

TEACHING AND LEARNING USING A CHILD-FOCUSED APPROACH IN A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM IN MONTSERRAT

Statement of Problem

By some measures education in Montserrat could be judged to be highly successful. One hundred percent of eligible children attend school (UNESCO, 2000) and delinquency is rarely a problem. However, although children spend so much of their lives in school very little attention is placed on how they experience schooling. Academic concerns take precedence over children's creative, emotional, mental, physical and social needs. The main concern seems to be that they produce satisfactory results on achievement tests. Kindergarten, as the first level of the elementary school system, reflects mainly academic concerns and does not generally employ play-based activities. School subjects, for example, are taught separately according to a preplanned timetable. My research concerned the experience of school for teachers and students when a more integrated and flexible approach was used.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this case study was to interpret the meaning of teaching and learning when using a child-focused approach to kindergarten education. Just as we in the western world expect doctors to base their diagnosis and treatments on medical research instead of relying on hunches (Crosser, 2005) so too, we, as educators need to be more aware of and apply best practices based on current and relevant research. This research has the potential to fill a gap in understanding teaching using non-standard methods in Caribbean schools. It was not my intention to discover one "true" or correct way of teaching and learning in kindergarten in a Montserratian context, but instead "to begin to come to grips with those events" (Boostrom, 1994, p. 63) that occur as a result of using a variety of instructional strategies. Through this experience I gained a deeper understanding of teaching as well as of children's experience during the initial phase of their educational journey.

In the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) vision of Education For All, Montserrat's mission for "primary education is to provide all children with the opportunity to develop to the fullest their intellectual, social, physical, moral and psychological potential, thus enabling them to enter the secondary level of education with confidence and determination" (UNESCO, 2000). In order to measure the impact of their education, students are tested at various points in the course of their schooling. Despite the fact that the mission of the Ministry of Education in Montserrat is to advocate for the global development of children, the social, moral and psychological aspects are not emphasized, since the tests usually focus on subject content. I have often wondered what impact, if any, I have as a teacher on the global development of children in my classroom. Although the focus of the study is on the teaching and learning process, I recognize that performance on achievement tests is important, and that teaching, learning, and assessment are intimately related and therefore cannot be naturally separated from each other.

This research took the form of a qualitative case study within my classroom, providing an avenue "to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). In addition to contributing to my development as a teacher and a researcher, it is expected that the insights gained will contribute to our understanding of young children's experiences in Caribbean classrooms, stimulate debate concerning early childhood education policy in Montserrat, and provide fodder for dialogue and the basis for future research.

Research Question

As children's author Mem Fox (2001) observed, "It is good teachers that are remembered, not good methods" (p. 106). Consequently, it is pertinent to place emphasis not merely on instructional methods and strategies, but rather on their use by teachers and their perceived significance to students' experiences at school. I agree with Hatch (2005) that "successful teaching requires different kinds of instructional approaches and strategies" (p. 69). There is no one ideal instructional method that can be used in all instances. Instead, teachers need to be creative, flexible and vigilant while employing a variety of methods in order to maximize students' learning. The choice of methods will depend on the purpose of the activity, the ability and interest of the child/children, the time and the environment, and most importantly the teacher's views of childhood, teaching and learning.

In order to understand the whole, one also needs to understand the parts and the relationships between and among the parts (Schleiermacher, 1977; van Manen, 1977). In the context of this study, this means "the teacher also learns, and the child also teaches, [and that] teaching is not just *instruction*" (Gartrell, 2000, p. 151).

My research question is therefore,

What is the experience of a teacher and her students in a child-focused kindergarten classroom in Montserrat?

A child-focused approach is defined as integrating the academic subjects of the curriculum using a variety of direct and indirect teaching approaches including play, and considering the children's interests in determining topics for in-depth study. My understanding of experience is drawn from Dewey (1938), who described it, as "the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives" (p.44). How children experience school includes their sense of belonging) in the classroom environment in addition to what happens (Osertman, 2000), not only as measured by formal summative assessment, but also during the teaching and learning activities. Because the children's interactions with their peers and teacher influence their learning (Jones & Jones, 1998), social relationships played an important part in the study.

My Journey to Becoming a Teacher-Researcher

My journey to become a teacher-researcher began when I started school at the age of four. I attended a private elementary school in Montserrat where the subject content was loosely structured. Consequently I was exposed to science, geography, history and current affairs through stories and large group discussions in an integrative manner. Although we were taught using mostly direct instruction, we did not have regular achievement tests. Instead, we were promoted, and sometimes demoted, from class to class at ad hoc times based on our ongoing performance. Textbooks were not required, and to the best of my recollection there were no timetables. My fear concerning exams arose later when I left the protected world of my elementary school and encountered the secondary school common entrance examination, a practice that was only discontinued in the 1980s when universal secondary education was introduced (Fergus, 2003).

I adored my kindergarten teacher and most of my elementary school teachers. I felt comfortable and safe at school. As an only child, I also loved going to school to socialize before the school day began, at recess and after school. Life at secondary school was less enjoyable; I no longer felt like an individual, many teachers spent only a few minutes a day with me and I was just one of many students. By the end of secondary school, however, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher: and not just a teacher but an elementary school teacher.

It is not necessary to complete formal training before becoming a teacher in Montserrat. However, because of my lack of confidence generated by my secondary school experience, I pursued studies leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Elementary Education at the University of the Virgin Islands on St. Thomas (an American Territory in the Caribbean). During my teacher education, I was introduced to interactive and non-direct teaching approaches that were unlike the didactic direct approaches I had grown accustomed to during my schooling in Montserrat. At the Grade Two level where I completed the majority of my practicum I had the opportunity to teach subjects in an integrative way. This meant that my first formal introduction to subject segmentation at the elementary school level occurred after I returned to Montserrat to teach in a public school in 1987.

As a teacher I have always tried to adjust my instructional strategies according to what I perceived to be the needs of individual students in light of the subject matter. I recall an incident early in my teaching career when I was concerned over a girl in my class who appeared to have difficulty with recall. At that time, having succumbed to the pressures of the school culture, I relied heavily on tests to evaluate learning. The student seemed uninterested in formal learning activities, and this puzzled me because she seemed to like coming to school and was always eager to converse with me during recess or other informal times. She always had stories to share about television soap operas and radio programs. I decided to use her interest in stories to relate a lesson on a Montserrat national holiday, St. Patrick's Day. I presented the facts using a dramatic story format and not only did she remember every detail, the entire class also enjoyed this session. I wondered if I could achieve the same level of motivation in other class activities. How could I incorporate their interests or preferred ways of learning into my teaching? As a consequence I sometimes taught subject area content through story and dramatization, and I also began to incorporate a variety of media and children's interests into my daily classroom activities. In the context of the Montserratian school culture, I became a non-conformist teacher, and my interest in educational media led me to return to the University of the Virgin Islands to complete a master's degree in educational technology.

Returning home and teaching in what was viewed to be a non-conformist manner led to questions from more senior teachers, as well as parents. They were more comfortable and accustomed to direct instructional approaches producing large quantities of work filling exercise books, and orderly teacher controlled classrooms. I felt caught in the middle: the children seemed to enjoy the process and were learning, yet the adults questioned the noise level, the lack of recognizable classroom management strategies, and the limited use of exercise books. This caused me to reflect more deeply on my teaching approach as I sought to justify my beliefs and practices. Believing that "the name of the game is no longer knowledge alone but rather the belonging together of knowledge and wisdom" (Aoki, 1993, p. 267), I began my search for answers partly to restore my dwindling self-confidence as a teacher.

That search ultimately led me to the University of Alberta to pursue doctoral studies in Early Childhood Education. Brazilian teacher-philosopher Paulo Freire concluded that reflection on one's life with others will eventually lead to change for the better. I am a more reflective teacher as a result of this experience. Freire also saw language and literacy that incorporated a variety of "symbolic languages, like art, poetry, music and drama" (Gura, 1996, p.14) as vital to reflection. In this study I included various symbolic languages to enhance my understanding of teaching and learning in a kindergarten classroom. It is envisioned that this enhanced understanding would prove beneficial in my new role as the Education Officer responsible for Early Childhood Education in Montserrat where I am expected to advice on appropriate policy and practice for the education and care of children from birth to eight years.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Island of Montserrat

Montserrat is a British Dependent Territory situated in the West Indies, 25 miles southwest of Antigua. Although the island covers an area of 102.3 square kilometers, only 33.7 square kilometers are habitable (the Safe Zone) because of ongoing volcanic activity which started in 1995 (Appendix A). In the seven-year period from 1995 to 2002 the population of Montserrat sharply declined, from over 10,000 to 4,563 (Statistics Department, 2003). Prior to 1995, the economy of Montserrat was derived mainly from tourism, grants from overseas agencies, construction, and "remittances from migrants" (Bray and Packer, 1993, p. 145) based mainly in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. In 2001 the unemployment rate was relatively high at thirteen percent because of the ongoing volcanic activity, compared with sixteen percent in Jamaica and eleven percent in Antigua and Barbuda. Employment is mainly in Public Administration and Defense, construction, education, health and social work, wholesale and retail trade, and the transport, storage and communication industries (Statistics Department, 2003).

Montserrat forms a part of the Lesser Antillean chain of islands in the West Indies known as the Leeward Islands because of their exposure to the northeast trade winds. Local historian Howard Fergus (2003) observed "the Leeward Islands are not a homogeneous group in either physical structure or development profile, but they were all established and managed as sugar and slave colonies with varying degrees of success" (p. 2). Its Amerindian residents, the Caribs, knew Montserrat as Alliouagana. In 1493 Christopher Columbus sighted and named the island Montserrat while searching for gold on behalf of the Spanish monarchy and by 1632, the island's first-known European settlers – "Irish Catholics in search of religious asylum" (p. 3) – arrived from the nearby island of St. Kitts.

British and French authorities exchanged ownership of the island several times before it was restored to England by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Montserrat's economic value to the Europeans was as a sugar producer. This eventually led to the forced importation of labourers from West Africa and the introduction of slavery. Ever since then slavery has shaped the island's historical, economic, cultural, and social development, including the island's education system as will be described below. As a result of slavery the island's population has always been predominantly of African decent. Slavery in British colonies was abolished in 1838, yet almost a hundred years later residents who were descendants of slaves did not have access to education because of the cost of school supplies (Fergus, 1994). This contributed to social problems and led to observations by colonial authorities that there were an "increasing number of stray and vagabond children on the island" (p. 173).

Concepts of Childhood in Montserrat

Montserratian concepts of childhood and child rearing are one context for understanding the bias against the use of play in schools. With the introduction of British colonization to Montserrat in the early seventeenth century including the subsequent introduction of slavery, came a particular perception of children and childhood, which has had a lasting impact on childrearing and educational development on the island. Hughes (1991) explained:

> While the French maintained an appreciation for play, even as they relegated it to the realm of childhood, the emphasis in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was almost completely on the value of work for both children and adults. (p.7)

Similar ideas concerning children and work were exported from Britain to the Caribbean, though in the "highly racialized context" of a slave society (Diptee, 2007, p. 49). Childrearing in the Caribbean also reflects the influences of an African heritage. The need for adults to work away from home created a culture where children spend a considerable amount of their waking hours together without adult supervision. Grantham-McGregor, Landman and Desai's (1982) study of childrearing practices in Jamaica revealed "a pattern of many social contacts, outdoor activities and authoritarian discipline. While teaching and preparation for school were highly regarded, there was little conscious effort to foster cognitive and language development through play" (p.57). It is not typical for adults to encourage young children's questions or for adults to engage children in conversation (Arnold, 1982).

As noted by Grantham-McGregor, et al. (1982), authoritarian discipline is a prevalent child rearing strategy in Jamaica, and non-abusive physical punishment of children is common in other English-speaking Caribbean countries (Arnold, 1982). Roopnarine, Bynoe, Singh, and Simon (2005), in a broad review of African Caribbean parenting practices, note that physical punishments "are sanctioned at home and in school by parents and pupils alike" (p. 318). These generally involve "denigration, such as verbal putdowns about a child's inadequacies and/or beating with a belt or a stick" (p. 318). An historical interpretation of this is that children need firm adult direction because of their inherent sin and willful nature. In this view, corporal punishment was conceived as an educational principle (Cleverley & Phillips, 1986). A study by Payne (1989) of attitudes of West Indian parents toward punishment found the ten most common punishable behaviors to be "disrespect to parents or elders, dishonesty, general disobedience, stealing, repeated disobedience, indecent language, violence, deliberate defiance, disregard for the rules of the home or community, laziness and neglect of chores" (p. 394). Gopaul-McNicol (1999) conducted interviews with parents and professionals from English-speaking countries in the Caribbean, finding that physical discipline was believed to be a form of training in addition to being a punishment (p. 83). In schools as well, physical discipline was conceived to have a training function, and it was therefore considered incumbent on teachers to apply it as necessary. Arnold (1982) suggests there is a "ritualized character" to the punishment as relief of parents' anxiety. "When ... children seem indifferent, are careless with their possessions, and 'refuse' to make good use of educational opportunities, these failings tend to be regarded as personal rebuffs and rejection" (p. 142).

A pervasive Protestant work ethic is a further influence on attitudes toward play, where play is regarded as frivolous and irresponsible. Play is seen as vital only if it enables children to cultivate socially adequate manners and skills (Hughes, 1991). Play is tolerated and accepted in Montserrat's early childhood centers such as daycare and nursery schools, but not in kindergarten. Perceptions of childhood and ideas concerning play have contributed to the cultural practice of permitting children to play with their peers without adult supervision. Play is largely regarded as an activity for socializing and entertainment and not for instruction. In light of these beliefs it is understandable that play as an educational activity has a low acceptance amongst parents and teachers. It follows that although it is a common pastime in the Caribbean, there is a paucity of information regarding its use for educational purposes.

Education in Montserrat

The formal education system in Montserrat arose partly out of a perceived need for social control by the ruling powers. Chamoiseau's (1997) account of his school days on the French West Indian island of Martinique highlights the similarity experienced by colonial children as their local ways were deemed "bad" and how they were indoctrinated through education where the use of corporal punishment was the norm. Corporal punishment which indicated dominion by teachers over children has been blamed for instilling fear and a dislike for school among colonial children. Education was all about amassing information and "proper" ways of living that were vastly different from home-based ways. The main aim of school was to socialize children into European traditions using a transmission model of teaching. Subject content was most often unrelated to local concerns or children's daily lives. Schooling was and still is closely intertwined with "economic, cultural and political power" (London, 2002, p. 54). Schools in colonies were primarily designed to serve the needs of the colonizers. Although in some instances the needs of local people were also met, there is no evidence to indicate that education in the West Indies had the input or consent of the colonized population (London, 2002).

Like other former colonies, Montserrat inherited "traditional educational policies that treat children as vessels to be filled with knowledge, and that shove that knowledge in at all costs, all the time incessantly measuring whether the stuffing stayed put" (Adams, 2002, p. 4). This was also the situation in Antigua, where "teaching has been by rote with little attention paid to involving children actively in their own learning" (Canning & Bird, 1992, p. 35). Schooling culture continues in the Caribbean in the same way, and there is often very little opportunity for students to work collaboratively or express learning using alternate representations. Observations of education in other former colonies such as Anguilla, India, Kenya, Martinique, St. Kitts and Nevis, and West African nations indicate the common practice of putting more emphasis on the end product of testing than on the process of education in schools (Berry, Poonwassie & Berry, 1999; Canning & Bird, 1992; Fergus, 1994, 2003; London, 2002; Payne & Barker, 1986).

The West India Royal Commission of 1938-1939 (often referred to as the Moyne Commission because it was chaired by Walter Edward Guinness, Lord Moyne) visited the Leeward Islands interviewing residents about their social conditions. In the report Montserrat's "education [system] was criticized as being too academic and verbal rather than 'real', cutting off the living interest of the child" (Fergus, 1994, p. 177). Yet more than six decades later, as I found in my own experience as a teacher, schooling in Montserrat is still predominantly didactic and abstract, with the chalkboard being the dominant educational technology.

Schooling in Montserrat consists of seven years at the elementary stage and at least four at the secondary level. Attendance is compulsory from five- to 16 years-of-age. Kindergarten is the initial grade level and children enter during the school year in which they will be five by March 31. In 2006 there were four elementary schools on the island, including one operated by the Roman Catholic Church and a private school established by Seventh Day Adventist businessmen and fathers of young children. Although preschool education was not compulsory, prior to the onset of volcanic activity, 95 percent of three- to five-year-olds attended a government-run nursery school system in the two years prior to kindergarten. Attendance at nursery schools fell to 80 percent at the height of the volcanic crisis in 1998. Family members care for 75 percent of children younger than three-years-of-age while the remaining children in this age group are enrolled in government-run day care centers. The demand for placement in day care centers is always greater than available facilities can accommodate (UNESCO, 2000).

School attendance laws are revered by adults in Montserrat and almost all children including those with special needs attend school during the entire mandated age range. Schooling is considered a privilege and attendance is encouraged by society and endured by students. The compactness of the community makes it is easy to spot a truant, and the appropriate authorities are usually then quickly alerted. Even at the peak of the volcanic crisis in the1998 - 1999 academic year, attendance was 92.5 percent of the total enrolment of primary school children (Ministry of Education, 2002). The Community Services Department (a government agency) in conjunction with service groups such as the Red Cross and the Rotary Club assists parents experiencing financial difficulty by providing uniforms, lunch, and school supplies in order to ensure school attendance.

Although a British Dependent Territory, Montserrat is responsible for the education of its citizens. As a member of regional organizations such as the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), efforts are ongoing to harmonize education systems in the region and give them a Caribbean flavour and relevance. These efforts have generally brought considerable development in the region's education systems, most noticeably in the localization of curriculum content. Yet there has been very little evidence of dramatic changes in the orientation of most schooling practices. For example although corporal punishment was outlawed in 1992 it is still evident in some classrooms (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1993).

Elementary schools' classrooms are basically identical throughout the former British colonial territories in the Caribbean. Teachers stand at the front and students, usually wearing uniforms, sit at desks arranged in rows to accommodate direct teaching styles. Describing the stark ritual of this classroom activity that is tied to preplanned timetables and the use of basic technologies, Bray (1997) observed, "the teachers wrote on blackboards with chalk and the school day was broken into neat periods which were separated by the ringing of bells" (p. 105). In this context variations in classroom practice depend mostly on the philosophy, personality and creativity of individual teachers. Having spent the majority of my educational career in this type of school system as a student, teacher, and parent, I am aware of the boredom and stress that such schooling can engender, yet no attention has been given to researching teaching in a non-conformist manner in a Caribbean school.

Montserratian education is rooted in the tradition of British colonial schooling, which was different in important respects from the way education developed in Britain. The reluctance to adopt more progressive educational practices is due in large part to a general satisfaction with the status quo. It is not uncommon for Montserratians living in England to send their children home to the island to attend school. A study by Windrass and Nunes (2003) confirms that Montserratian parents with children at school in England view schooling on the island as superior in many respects. The researchers identified a conflict between the "school scripts" of Montserratian parents and English teachers regarding notions of independence and interdependence. The English teachers' role was considered by the Montserratian parents and the teachers themselves as separate from children's learning. For example, teachers would move on to new material whether or not individual students had a full understanding of the current material. English teachers pointed to the pressures of the National Literacy scheme as part of the problem. Windrass and Nunes further described the differences in scripts as being "conceived and maintained within a culture-specific belief system about the development of a person" (p. 564).

> In independence oriented societies [such as England], the teacher's and the children's job in a teaching-learning situation can be conceived as independent of each other ... In an interdependent script [as in Montserrat], teaching and learning are part of the same activity: the teacher follows the children in the learning process, encourages them to practice further if they are having difficulties, does not move on if learning has not taken place, and puts herself out to motivate the children to learn. (p. 564)

It was therefore important for me to keep in mind that by introducing alternative teaching methods, I was not only challenging accepted modes of teaching, but cultural models of teaching and learning held by the parents and the children themselves.

The Kindergarten Curriculum

The Ministry of Education in Montserrat coordinates curriculum development in a way similar to most islands in the Caribbean region. In general, a curriculum writing team including experienced teachers is organized by an Education Officer. The usual end product of this exercise is the creation of "objectives and curriculum guides" (Berry, Poonwassie & Berry, 1999, p.2) rather than guiding principles or philosophical statements which are largely assumed. At the classroom level, each teacher is responsible for preparing a monthly plan (called an extent) based on the curriculum guides. This is then discussed with the school's Head Teacher. There are currently no assigned textbooks for use in the two government-run elementary schools. Each teacher prepares her own lesson plans and therefore the selecting, organizing and adapting of materials is each teacher's prerogative. However, there is little variation from classroom to classroom, and most teachers use the didactic approach that can lead to "an over-emphasis on prescribed content coverage [that] may not be congruent with the styles of learning and thinking which are characteristic of young children" (Wood & Attfield, 1996, p. 99).

The Ministry of Education is currently in the process of introducing teachers to strategies developed and used in the United Kingdom that encourage the integration of the various components of the Language Arts and Mathematics. Both the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) were launched in 1998 and 1999 respectively by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to address standards of literacy and numeracy in British schools. As was discussed in relation to differing approaches to school scripts in England and Montserrat (Windrass & Nunes, 2003), these imported strategies faced significant challenges in their implementation. In the NLS framework, high quality oral work: interactive, encouraging, expecting and extending pupils' contributions are all hallmarks of successful teaching. The NNS framework similarly states: "high-quality direct teaching is oral, interactive and lively … in which pupils are expected to play an active part by answering questions, contributing points to discussion and explaining and demonstrating their methods to the class" (Smith, Hardman, Wall & Mroz, 2004, p. 396). Critics however, have argued that "there is no clear definition and little practical advice for teachers on what interactive whole class teaching is and how it should be used in the classroom" (p. 395). According to some researchers (Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall & Pell, 1999) there is little evidence that the NLS and the NNS teaching approaches look different from the traditional whole class teaching practices. Smith, Hardman, Wall and Mroz (2004) concluded from their observations, "it is clear that the teacher dominated the whole class section 74% of the time" (p. 502). On average, highly effective teachers created more opportunities for their students' informal talk.

There have been other attempts to make instruction more child-centred as evidenced in policy documents, but as Bray (1997) noted, surface changes in education systems do not necessarily signify deeper long-term changes or even significant changes in the short term. This is partly because few changes are made to the conditions under which teachers work in classrooms. In addition, the pressures and expectations from parents, colleagues, and the community for achievement testing still persist. The structure of the school day and the academic year usually does not allow time for significant adult involvement in daily teaching and learning activities (Wood, 2004). In addition, the type of resources available to schools and the teacher:student ratio remains the same. So, although educational aims change in policy documents, the original conditions remain intact, and teachers may continue teaching as usual or easily return to teaching as usual.

A feature impacting childhood in Montserrat is the relative economic wellbeing of its citizens. Bray and Packer (1993) observed that "despite the territory's lack of natural resources, its people have a relatively high standard of living" (p. 145). Telephone service and cable television connections are found in the majority of Montserratian households, and the number of homes with computers and internet connections is constantly rising. A main source of this prosperity is the culturally obligatory tradition of remittances from Montserratians living overseas (Bray and Packer, 1993). All of those remaining on the island benefit, because all Montserratians have relatives who reside overseas. For those living in Montserrat, traveling overseas to visit family members is a common event. As a result most children entering kindergarten have either traveled overseas at least once or will be planning to in the near future.

The relative wealth and exposure gained from travel along with the two years of activity-based nursery school education that most children experience, mean that children come to kindergarten with knowledge and understanding derived from a variety of sources in addition to the home. Teachers in Montserrat are therefore challenged to find ways of making teaching and learning in classrooms more exciting and stimulating. Through this study I adopted and employed approaches outlined in the OECS (2002) documents that were being introduced for use in the primary school classrooms on the island. In addition, I incorporated play-based, integrated, direct, and indirect approaches to teaching (Hatch, 2005) within a child-focused perspective. My anticipation was that children in this environment would have more active roles in their learning and use alternative forms of representation to understand, express and communicate their knowledge.

Perspectives on Teaching and Learning

Direct and Indirect Approaches

Direct teaching has theoretical roots in behavioral psychology. In direct teaching, instruction is based on pre-planned and organized content that the teacher delivers using pre-determined approaches. This may be done without regard to children's interests or individual abilities. As it is based on the assumption that knowledge exists outside the learner, direct teaching assumes that the teacher only needs to transfer information and the learner will receive it. In direct teaching the focus is on outcomes, namely, what the learner will be able to do at the end of instruction. An overuse of direct approaches limits children's likelihood of understanding and developing critical thinking (Hatch, 2005) as students will have limited opportunities to be actively involved in the learning process. While good direct teaching should consider the abilities of each child, the focus is on the outcome and quantity of information, and not necessarily the quality or understanding of the learning.

In contrast, indirect teaching, based on the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (Hatch, 2005, p. 75) for example, is a form of incidental teaching. During indirect teaching, learning is achieved through scaffolding and other teaching strategies, where a learner is assisted either individually or within a group to move beyond their own independent level of ability to a new independent level. While scaffolding can be achieved during direct teaching, the exchange is usually in one direction. In this case, limited opportunities are presented for the roles of teacher and learner to be interchanged from one moment to the next. During indirect teaching however, exchange is seldom dominated by one individual and each can enhance the other's learning.

As discussed in the review of education in Montserrat, direct teaching is the dominant approach on the island and in the Caribbean, and is common in schools world-wide (Alexander, 2001). There are a number of practical reasons why it is favoured in Montserrat. Although there have been considerable debates in recent years about making instruction child-centred, "the dominant model of schooling still shows its western [colonial] heritage, with all the paraphernalia of blackboards, classrooms, desks, uniforms, timetables and so on" (Bray, 1997, p. 114). In Montserrat, in order to compensate for the lack of formal teacher training there is an apprenticeship period during which a new teacher works under the guidance of more experienced teachers. As a result, teaching is inclined to maintain the status quo, a situation Fergus (1994) described bluntly as "a kind of inbreeding which reinforced the rote and recitative methods" (p. 179). Teachers tend to teach the way they were taught (Ball, 1990) and without the aid of an assistant it is usually easier for a teacher who is assigned a class with as many as 30 children to use the more familiar didactic approach. Although research indicates that "a didactic approach is not necessary to promote children's learning of academic skills" (Dunn & Kontos, 1997, p.11), to the majority of Monserratian teachers it seems the most efficient way to maximize human resources and time while achieving the mandated academic goals.

Play-Based Perspectives

Play is considered necessary for normal child development (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005). Defining play, however, is not a simple task. Play theorists suggest that there is no clear demarcation between play and activities such as work, exploration, and learning, though most agree that to be considered as play, an activity should be intrinsically motivating, freely chosen, pleasurable, nonliteral, and actively engaging (Hughes, 1991; Hughes, Noppe & Noppe, 1996).

Although work, exploration, and learning activities may also be pleasurable and freely chosen, these activities are often engaged in while focusing on an end product such as winning or achieving a particular reward, for example, the praise of a teacher, parent, peers or the community. Therefore, they cannot be classified as being intrinsically motivating. On the contrary, in play activities participants focus on the process or the action. In a play-based learning situation, a student should not feel forced or manipulated into participation, but has a choice whether to participate or not.

Play is considered nonliteral because it often involves an aspect of make-believe and employs symbolism. During a play activity, participants can assume new roles and create imaginary situations. In play, reality can be exaggerated, and the players should be "involved physically, psychologically, or both, rather than passive or indifferent to what is going on" (Hughes, 1991, p. 3). Play engages not only the physical but also the mental self.

In the field of early childhood education play is commonly used as a teaching strategy (direct and indirect) and a natural way for children to learn (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Brewer, 2004; Froebel, 1900; Hughes, 1991; Paley, 1997; Paley, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 1996). In the words of Hancock and Osterweil (1996), "play is nature's greatest educational device. During play, children routinely exhibit the inventiveness, experimentation, and enjoyment of thinking that sometimes seem so sorely lacking in schools" (p. 1). Play allows children to focus more on the process of learning than simply the accumulation of knowledge. Hancock and Osterweil, who studied mathematical play through the use of computer games, found that features of good games matched the characteristics of play. In addition to being actively engaging, pleasurable, freely chosen, and intrinsically motivating, these games allowed children to "project themselves imaginatively into worlds that embody powerful mathematical ideas" (p. 1). Where the focus of a game is the actual activity, winning then becomes an additional benefit. This contrasts with an emphasis on factual knowledge accumulation and achievement testing that limits young children's opportunities to express their learning in alternative ways.

Play is also important within social-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1986). In this view, symbolic play in particular is a leading activity in child development with the potential to promote self-regulation in the early years (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). In play, children are able to achieve mastery of their own understanding and behaviour. Language development and play are associated as children engaged in play not only extend their language, but also their symbolic thinking as they converse with one another.

Though play is widely supported by researchers and educational theorists, its place in schools is uncertain. As has been indicated in the case of Montserrat, this is partly due to different cultural beliefs regarding play and learning. It is also related to the prevalence of accountability standards required by governments at the policy level, by parents, community members and teachers at the classroom level, and at the theory level by academics and researchers (Wood & Attfield, 1996). The academic expectations set for young children are continually escalating, challenging teachers to bank as much knowledge as possible in as little time as possible using the limited resources that are available. As a consequence, using play as a teaching and learning strategy in the classroom is rarely a first choice for teachers in Montserrat.

A Child-Focused Approach

I believe using incidental along with more direct approaches is pedagogically appropriate and respectful of children's interests. Using play in a deliberate manner to integrate curriculum content addresses the cultural and developmental needs of children, along with the learning outcomes described in Montserrat's primary education documents (Ministry of Education, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2004).

I have been inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, where learning is based on relationships between and among children, teachers, parents, and the environment. In a play-based educational setting grounded on relationships, communication becomes

> more complex and reveals itself through the voices and thoughts of children, through agreement and disagreement, through continuous negotiation that produces growth of thought and representation through many languages (that is, through many modes of symbolically representing ideas, such as drawing, painting, modeling, verbal description, numbers, physical movement, drama, puppets, etc.). (Binkley, Mayberry, Schwarzendruber, Schreiber & States, 2004, p.11)

In this view, regular paper and pencil achievement testing can never fully reveal the true scope of learning especially during the early years. Alternative forms of representation accommodate children's varied abilities, encourage problem solving, promote creativity and hopefully enhance their self esteem. In Malaguzzi's (1998b) metaphoric language, children have one hundred languages, or one hundred ways of thinking, playing, and speaking. School culture often denies the use of these by isolating the head and thinking from the body and creative expression. Incorporating varieties of creative expression in the classroom can enable children to become "more capable, more brave and more self-assured than they actually are" (Calabrese, 2003, p. 607).

The teacher's role in interactive classrooms is guided by a pedagogical philosophy that stresses the importance of relationships, reciprocity, co-construction, research, collaboration, partnership, active observation, and documentation (Bredekamp, 1993). In this view, teachers are responsible for the formation of relationships with each student and their parents in addition to fostering and encouraging the formation of relationships among children that are essential for co-construction, peer-learning and scaffolding. The process of teaching and learning cannot be detached from learning outcomes. Acquisition of skills and knowledge should not be seen as the end but rather as a prelude to a subsequent teaching or learning activity. In this respect assessment should be varied and ongoing throughout instruction instead of only at the end of instruction using a single format (Gullo, 2005; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels & Milburn, 1995).

Integrating Curriculum

Learners can have difficulty internalizing isolated information, skills and concepts presented under separate subject labels outside of meaningful contexts. An integrated approach to curriculum highlights connections across subjects and builds bridges between old and new knowledge. In addition, students become part of learning communities "that enhance the development of children, teachers, families and the [larger] community in which they live" (New, 2002, p. 259). Organizing learning experiences for young children into units, projects or integrated theme studies can be developmentally and culturally appropriate since it encourages them to see connections and links. It helps them establish real relationships among the subject content, their interests, and prior knowledge. It is commendable that teachers in Eastern Caribbean primary schools are being advised to manage their classroom timetable to "facilitate integration" (OECS, 2002, p. 5). As we have seen, however, the school culture, limited training in integrated teaching approaches and shortage of various resources combine to make this difficult.

One common way to organize curriculum is for a teacher to pre-select units based on curriculum content. The resulting lesson plans are usually designed in a linear fashion to develop certain skills and understandings as determined by the teacher. Units are more linear than integrated, although the information is presented in such a systematic sequence that children are better able to see logical connections. Projects on the other hand are planned with the children, where a project is defined as "an extended in-depth investigation of events or phenomena worth learning more about within [children's] own environment" (Katz, 2003, p.11). In projects the topic of study emerges from children's curiosity, and is therefore more in keeping with an integrated approach.

The Reggio Emilia approach supports integrated learning consistent with Howard Gardner's notion of schooling for multiple intelligences. The arts are ideal for promoting the integration necessary to enable cognitive, linguistic, and social development. "Multiple forms of representation – print, art, construction, drama, music, puppetry, and shadow play – are viewed as essential to children's understanding of experience (Cyert Center for Early Education, 2006).

An integrated approach to the curriculum presents educational experiences as social activities. An educational experience results from the interaction between an individual's psychological and social self and not merely the result of an external transmission of facts (Dewey, 1897). Since "the school must represent life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground" (p. 79) – subject content cannot be meaningfully presented in a segregated way. "The child's introduction into the more formal subjects of the curriculum should be through the medium of (social) activities" (p. 78). Dewey encouraged exposing new knowledge and skills not as separate subject matter in a specific sequential order per grade level but rather through social interaction which presents the learner with "the ability to interpret ... the experience already had" (p. 78). Language, besides being an expression of thought used for retrieving and passing on information, is important as a vital social instrument during the education process. Integrated learning experiences are ideal and more beneficial especially for young learners as expressed by Dewey:

> If education is life, all life has, from the outset, a scientific aspect, an aspect of art and culture, and an aspect of communication. It cannot, therefore, be true that the proper studies for one grade are mere reading and writing, and that at a later grade, reading, or literature, or science, may be introduced. The progress is not in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience (p. 78).

When education is viewed as a continuing reconstruction of experience, the process and the goal of education are seen as the same.

The way integration was used in the present study was mainly "vertical integration" described by Case (1997) as "integrating areas of study that students encounter at any given time – among subjects within a given grade" (p. 334). This was done through the insertion of "selected aspects of one subject to another subject" (p. 334).

In addition, over our year together there were a number of occasions when children's interests caused us to explore topics far beyond the official kindergarten curriculum in a more serendipitous manner.

Using Children's Interests

To ensure topics were appropriate for the particular group of children, their interest in a topic and how it related to their daily lives were considered. Brown (1986) explains:

> A good topic will provide opportunities for children to learn mathematics, language and literacy, science and social studies. It will also allow children to become actively involved in gathering information and constructing their own knowledge. Firsthand learning experiences are important along with opportunities for children to use what they experience in dramatic play, experiments, discussions, reading and writing, and activities involving construction. In addition a good unit can often be extended to include learning about related topics. (p. 25)

A further criterion for a good topic is that the teacher should be interested and motivated because without a teacher's interest, deep and significant learning by children is unlikely to occur.

Integrating subject areas through projects initiated by children's interest can assist them to "begin early in life to see things as connected" (Boyer, 1995, p 24). This can also bridge the gap between the formal and lived curriculum. I agree with Portelli and Vibert (2001) that a teacher's aim should be to create "a curriculum of life that is grounded in the immediate daily world of students as well as in the larger social, political contexts of their lives" (p. 63). The interactive nature of an integrated curriculum has frequently given rise to classroom management questions. However, life itself is not orderly. It is constantly changing and education has to do with "our fundamental orientation and openness to the future" (Jardine, 1997, p. 216).

Integrating the curriculum in a Montserratian context meant that the objectives from several subject areas were combined into one learning activity, though most often, one subject area was dominant. In doing this it was also essential to pay attention to children's current interests and local happenings. Montserratians spend a considerable amount of time outdoors and schools and classrooms are exposed to the natural environment. For example, it is a common pastime for children to hunt and squash caterpillars during playtime. As a result I found the popular children's book *The very hungry caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1994) an excellent springboard for combining objectives in Phonics, Vocabulary, Reading, Comprehension, Science and Social Studies. Whereas I have always done this in my teaching, it is now more acceptable since the introduction of the United Kingdom-styled Literacy Strategy and the trend towards a more activity-based environment. In addition each kindergarten teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects except Music and Physical Education. Owing to the fact that in Montserrat's elementary/primary schools the bell only rings to signal the end of a teaching session and not the end of a subject session, subject integration has the possibility to flourish.

Toward a Child-Focused Educational Climate

According to the Montserrat Ministry of Education, what they termed a child-centred educational climate should be encouraged in an outcomes focused learning culture (Ministry of Education, 2004). Since a child-centred curriculum is built on the ideas, interests, and abilities of children, and is derived from a philosophy of education rooted in the ideas of Rousseau, Froebel, and Dewey (Gutek, 2001), it is safe to infer that there are gaps and mismatches between the policy and practice in most of Montserrat's kindergarten classrooms. This is largely attributed to the predominant values and beliefs of most parents and teachers who view children as dependent on adult direction in educational settings.

A child-centred curriculum recognizes each child as a unique capable individual and instead of forcing or expecting each child to "fit" the curriculum and its predetermined standard outcomes for all children, efforts are made to adjust the curriculum to suit the unique individual needs and abilities of each child. The interest and involvement of the children should fuel a lesson. There is no need for the teacher to always occupy center stage instead of being just a lead character of the entire act; working together with students to make links across the curriculum and to the students' prior knowledge and current interests. Because a child-centred curriculum focuses on the learning process and provides experiences that are unique to each child's literacy development, it "utilizes appropriate assessment procedures, such as observation techniques, and portfolios, to measure learning" (Moyer, 1999, p. 3). As indicated above, teachers in Montserrat point to the large numbers of students in their classrooms, and the pressure to use pre-determined instructional strategies and assessment methods as reasons to avoid using more child-centred methods.

At the same time I am aware that the notion of child-centred education is culture bound and as such is also an import to Montserrat. Child-centred education is clearly not a good fit with local views of education and/or childrearing. Child-centred ideas are rooted in a particular historical and cultural context of schooling. The term's prominence can be traced to the late 1800s and today is found in many early childhood policy documents around the world (Chung & Walsh, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2004). Although the meaning of the term *child-centred* has changed across time and cultures (Cannella, 1997; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Chung & Walsh, 2000), it is common practice to "ignore these complexities and contradictions and posit a consensus on early schooling that does not exist" (Chung & Walsh, 2000, p. 25).

As explained above, childrearing practices in Montserrat are strongly influenced by the notion that children should be firmly guided by adults because children are not capable of moral self-direction. Conversely, Froebel, the founder of kindergarten who has been credited for popularizing the term child-centred, believed that children are capable of good though still requiring adult guidance. He advocated that curriculum should be in harmony with "children's real interests, needs and learning patterns" (Chung & Walsh, 2000, p. 216).

Bearing in mind the history and culture of schooling in Montserrat, adopting a truly child-centred kindergarten classroom would be problematic and perhaps inappropriate. By adopting a child-focused approach to teaching and learning, activities were planned from a child's perspective but adult purpose was also recognized. Efforts were made to ensure that children were able to influence the course of activities through flexible planning allowing for unpredictable outcomes.

Child-focused approaches place more emphasis and value on "training the child's power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite, vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experiences" (Dewey, 1897, p.80) than on the preparation and presentation of teacher initiated activities. An effective learning experience should be one in which the child has some role in its direction. The aim is accomplished when the learner develops new understandings based on link(s) to her past experience.

Using a more child-focused educational approach eliminates the need for mere regurgitation of information. It requires that the teacher knows that the official national curriculum "is neither a gift nor an imposition – bits of information to be deposited in the students – but rather the organized, systematized, and developed "re-presentation" to individuals of the things about which they want to know more" (Friere, 1997, p. 153). It is envisioned that students in a child-focused classroom would be comfortable enough to ask questions and indicate which aspects of the curriculum they are most interested in investigating further with the assistance of the teacher. It is anticipated that a child-focused approach will enable children to "better understand the world around them" (Brown, 1986, p. 25), and facilitate the development of autonomy and social skills (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Gallas, 2001; Moyer, 1999; Oyler, 1996a; Oyler, 1996b; Paley, 1990; Paley, 1997; Paley, 2004).

CHAPTER 3

THE METHOD OF THE STUDY

A Qualitative Inquiry

In the last one hundred years of research on children and education, an enormous amount of information has been accumulated on topics such as *how early learning influences later academic performance, the influence of teachers' academic backgrounds on student performance and the effects of teaching strategies,* and *attendance on academic* performance. Far less attention has been paid to finding out "what it is like for children and adults to be there [in schools and classrooms] day after day, week after week"(Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. xvi). The prevalence of accountability, outcomes-based education and testing, have overshadowed studies of the actual experiences of students and teachers.

Since "participatory approaches encourage participation of groups not normally targeted by researchers" (Wint & Shillingford, 2003, p. 6), in this study the children were my partner-researchers. This contrasts with the traditional view that considered children as the subjects of study (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Sorin, 2003). When given the opportunity, children have proven to be capable of contributing to society in important ways. For me, involving children in their learning also reflected my teaching philosophy. "Healthy teachers," as James-Reid (2003) termed them, "are democratic teachers who empower their students by giving them opportunities to express their individuality and at the same time validate or affirm them" (p.94).

This study was conducted as an interpretive case study (Merriam, 1998) involving an "analysis of process set within a cultural perspective" (Creswell, 2002, p. 483). It is heuristic since it illuminated my understanding and hopefully that of the participants, their parents and my colleagues at the Brades Primary School. It is particularistic because as a case or "bounded system" it was chosen because of my deep interest to better understand kindergarten children under my tutelage instead of simply as a concern to generalize (Stake, 2000). Data was collected over a seven-month period during the 2005-2006 academic-year (September, 2005 to March, 2006) in my kindergarten classroom in a public school in Montserrat. The situation studied was therefore "a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context" (Yin, 1994, p, 13).

As has been described, in Montserrat the customary focus in school is the end product – a large accumulation of knowledge – instead of the learning process. My prior experiences integrating subjects were sources of conflict where it was sometimes felt that I was not *teaching* enough. On one occasion when I had been absent from my classroom for a few days, a parent scolded me saying, "You should see the amount of writing he did with the other teacher last week." On another occasion, when the teacher of another kindergarten class rejoiced that two of the students in her class ranked first and second on the end of the year exams, I felt defeated. I later learned that this is not an uncommon situation. As Goldstein (1998) pointed out, "early childhood-oriented primary grade teaching may actually appear counterproductive" (p.333).

Direct teaching, although an effective means of teaching skills and imparting factual and conceptual knowledge that are often required for achievement testing, is a very ineffective way for improving problem solving and creative thinking competencies (James-Reid, 2003). Phillip Jackson (1968) also helped me understand that this friction is bound to surface if education does not return to its roots as an art, with growth and development well regarded as idiosyncratic processes instead of only as a science that can be generalized, quantified and measured using achievement tests.

A social-constructivist approach informed and guided my understanding of teaching using a child-focused approach. Ontologically, this supports the notion that reality is made rather than found and that there are multiple local and specific constructions of meaning. Epistemologically, the researcher is viewed as a facilitator and participant, co-constructing meaning with the participants as the study progresses (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This view of qualitative research is concerned with the understanding and reconstruction of knowledge instead of providing an explanation through verifying or falsifying previous hypotheses (Ellis, 1998a, 1988b). With the kindergarteners as research partners, we individually and collectively interpreted and constructed our world as learners and teachers within the classroom. This is congruent with requirements for studies that are conducted in a social-constructivist paradigm maintaining that knowledge and truth are created and not discovered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

It was imperative that I involved the children in order to learn the "view from underneath" (Dolby, Dimitriadis & Willis, 2004, p. 187) and understand the impact of my teaching. I struggled with the idea that the classroom was my domain, my 'palace.' Thinking about the children as my research partners reminded me to share power in the classroom.

As the researcher I aimed to be a passionate participant, facilitating a multi-voice reconstruction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) of teaching using a child-focused approach. This was affirmed at least by visitors to the classroom during the study: an Education Official wrote: "There was a flexible and productive atmosphere and a high level of both teacher and pupil enthusiasm." A math consultant from the United Kingdom wrote: "The teacher was enthusiastic and involved all pupils." I employed joyful teaching as a teaching strategy to create situations that motivated children to experience learning with a sense of happiness.

Reviewing research on curriculum innovations at the early childhood level revealed a growing number of studies based on children's perspectives and children's experiences in classrooms (Gallas, 2001; Oyler, 1996; Paley, 1997). This study aimed to contribute to this through an interpretation of my own and the children's response to less formal teaching as expressed through routine classroom life. As Malaguzzi, (1998a) observed, knowledge "about children and for children [can] only be learned from children" (p. 49).

The Research Setting

The research was undertaken in the public primary school in Brades on the island of Montserrat. At the start of the year the school had a roll of 159 comprised of 81 boys and 78 girls. Thirty-five children were initially enrolled for the kindergarten grade, and as a consequence they were divided into two classes. Classrooms in Montserrat are considered self-contained worlds, segmented according to a single grade and/or teacher. The kindergarten classrooms were located in Block B on the Brades School Compound (Appendix C). Children had to exit the classroom to use the toilets in Block C, which were shared with the rest of the school. The classroom was used as the base for the study but the research expanded to include the entire school compound and extended community via visits from members of the community and the use of media (radio, television, DVD recordings).

Participants

Fifteen children, seven boys and eight girls, were enrolled in my 2005-2006 kindergarten class, in one of two public primary schools in Montserrat. Three boys and two girls were repeating their kindergarten year, a retention rate that was higher than the norm. Retaining children in kindergarten, however, is consistent with the belief that children should not be moved forward before they had acquired the necessary knowledge at their present level. Ten children had older siblings, five of whom were previously kindergarten students in my classes. At the start of the study, they were between 4 years 5 months and 5 years 11 months. The average age in September was 4 years 7 months and 5 years 6 months at the end of the study in March. Their parents represented a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, including individuals who worked in the private sector (domestic workers and an office manager for a real estate agency), were self employed (a gas station owner, a builder, and a day care provider). There were homemakers, labourers, civil servants (a government auditor, a fire officer, a postman, a mail sorter, a community development officer, an office attendant, and a computer programmer) and a political minister/government official. Children were not all born in Montserrat or of Montserratian parentage. Five, though of Montserratian parentage, were born in the United Kingdom and one in the United States. Six were born on the island and the others were born in other Caribbean countries. Five of the children had either one or both parents who were non-Montserratian accounting for a variation of cultures. Although the entire group was made up of individuals with a Christian background they represented a variety of denominations: Seventh Day Adventists, Methodists, Anglicans, and Pentecostals.

Ethical Considerations

In adhering to the University of Alberta's Standards for Protection of Human Research Participants, I applied for and received permission for my research from officials in the Ministry of Education in Montserrat and the University of Alberta. I also contacted the parents and the children assigned to my class, explained the nature of the study and invited the children's participation. On an individual basis I explained the process, my aims and objectives to the parents and guardians. Written descriptions were provided for the Director of Education and the head teacher of the school to which I was assigned. In addition a written description was provided to each parent/guardian at the initial contact along with a personal letter to each child and a request for consent in order to collect and record data including photographs from their child/children (Appendix D). Pseudonyms were used for each participant. Parents and guardians were encouraged to visit and observe at any time during the study. Parents were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time. One parent did withdraw from the study in January when the family migrated to England with the daughter. A letter which was sent in June thanking the parents and guardians for their child's participation also presented a preliminary analysis.

Jones and Jones (2003) reminded me to honour children's insights.

> An individual is the world's best expert on himself/herself. Students basically know better than anyone what factors make them comfortable, productive and happy. It is a fact of life that students have had fewer experiences than adults and

> consequently are less knowledgeable about the relationship between behaviour and its consequences. Nevertheless, students are often much more sensitive and aware than teachers acknowledge." (p. 49)

In light of this, I constantly discussed my interpretations with the children and their parents informally and individually. In order to minimize distortion and reconfirm consent, the children and their parents were invited to a Kindergarten reflection celebration in December, 2006, five months after our kindergarten experience ended but before submitting the final data analysis. After permission was requested and received, we convened in the library on the school compound during the Christmas school holidays immediately after the closure of the biannual Schools Arts Festival and the school's annual Christmas Concert. Prior to this, 10 of the participants completed an Exit Activity. Three of the participants were off island. Only six families participated in the reflection celebration. I subsequently learned that one parent was sick so the child was staying with a relative. Nonetheless there were adults representing two students who were unable to attend. Permission was requested and received from parents for the use of the photos presented in this dissertation. For the reflection celebration, a PowerPoint slide show of photos taken throughout our kindergarten experience ran continuously. It was enlightening and heartwarming to hear even the parents' excitement at seeing themselves, other parents and members of the community interacting with the children during the various activities. One parent was overheard saying to another "I miss the rapport and camaraderie that we had last year."

"Enormous obstacles are faced, and, indeed, created by those who seek (and seek to understand) new pedagogies" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 152). This study is not intended to either provide a prescription for early childhood education or to set criteria for judging other early childhood institutions, especially kindergarten classrooms. Readers have the option to either make judgments and/or agree with what has taken place in my inquiry. Readers will not be given prescriptions or generalizations. No two populations will have exactly the same experiences and circumstances.

Social-constructivist philosophy "is at home with diversity, complexity, subjectivity and multiple perspectives, and which, as part of an emancipatory practice, enables us to act as agents, to 'produce rather than reflect meaning'" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 106). My aim is to describe, interpret and understand the events that occurred during our teaching and learning encounter while I was involved in research and the improvement of my teaching practice in the school system in which I work. In addition I yearn to make a contribution to the local, regional and international learning communities.

Role of the Researcher

Boostrom (1994) described the process of undertaking qualitative research as a "plunge into the unknown" (p. 51). As a consequence a researcher engaged in qualitative research needs to be flexible. Had I been too rigid at the outset in relation to what to pay attention to in the classroom, I might have ignored surprising and valuable phenomena. As a consequence I tried to be open being aware that content can constantly grow and change throughout an entire study, even in the last phases of writing. The knowledge derived from a qualitative case study's data analysis is usually "more vivid, concrete and sensory than abstract" (Merriam, 1998, p. 31). It is usually very descriptive as it is rooted in the natural context of the subjects and more in line with the occurrences of daily experiences.

I was able to identify several stages during my time as a researcher in the classroom in accord with those described by Boostrom (1994). At the initial stage, things seemed to be so naturally a part of the educational activity that it was often difficult to focus and decide exactly what to write about and I would just write whatever I remembered. What I wrote seemed to have no focus and appeared to be just random comments and views. Photos and audio clips for the first few weeks leading up to and at the beginning of data collection also appeared to be random. There was evidence of me as an evaluator during the three weeks prior to the commencement of data collection and also during the first week of data collection. I recall once while videotaping before the start of data collection, the researcher in me disapproved of my reaction as teacher to a child's actions and I stopped the recording.

I think that I have also operated as both a subjective inquirer and a reflective interpreter. I was so engrossed in unearthing the meaning of what I was observing that instead of having a restful relaxing Sunday afternoon nap, I found my mind constantly wandering. I questioned my reaction to the children's requests to show their work to other adults, for example. What does it mean for them to want to immediately show others their work? What does it mean to expose life in the classroom to others outside the classroom? The teacher in me is so accustomed to having privacy and total control that I still wanted to be in total control of who saw what we were doing and when they saw it.

In an effort to become a more reflective interpreter of classroom life as time went on, not only in my own classroom but eventually in others as well, like Boostrom, I constantly worked at trying to discover exactly what to focus on to answer my research question: What is the experience of a teacher and her students in a child-focused kindergarten classroom in Montserrat? It appears that actually observing and reflecting on the classroom activities themselves provided the guidance I desired (Boostrom, 1994).

Data Collection

As the analysis aimed to produce a holistic description of classroom experiences I tried to be a *bricoleur*, spreading the net for evidence widely (Merriam, 1998). This minimized the likelihood of misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the data collected from the participants and observers (Stake, 2000). I aimed to provide a vivid description of classroom life, using the perception of as many of the participants and observers as possible in order to further my own understanding.

"Many a researcher would like to tell the whole story but of course cannot; the whole story exceeds anyone's knowing, anyone's telling … the holistic researcher, like the single issue researcher, must choose" (Stake, 2000, p. 441). Researchers teach through the presentation of their data using some combination of didactic or discovery approaches. Didactically the researcher generalizes and presents the findings from an expert vantage point. In a discovery approach, information is shared as one perspective, inviting the reader to interpret this through discovery learning. Since I believe that knowledge is a social construction my interpretations are not presented as if they are an expert's "true" findings but instead as pedagogical documentation, "transactional/subjectivist/created findings" in the words of Lincoln & Guba (2000). In this way they allow for reader interpretation, discovery learning and most importantly an invitation for further discussion.

"Pedagogical documentation involves the creation of diverse documents" that can be "shared, discussed, reflected upon and interpreted" (UNESCO, 2004, p.2). It supports many important educational purposes as it is both a data collection method and a source of data. As a data collection method pedagogical documentation provides an avenue for participants to generate data which makes the learning process visible. Documentation does not only refer to the learning process but also to the content emanating from the learning process. As content, it is

> material which records what the children are saying and doing, the work of the children, and how the pedagogue relates to the children and their work. This material can be produced in many ways and take many forms – for example, hand written notes of what is said and done, audio recordings and video camera recordings, still photographs, computer graphics, children's works itself.
>
> (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 148)

I appreciate what Malaguzzi (1998) described as children's one hundred languages, that is to say their many ways of knowing, communicating and expressing their experiences and knowledge of the world. This notion was my inspiration for collecting data in a variety of media. I was flexible and therefore it was easy to accept and/or reflect on sources of data that I had not envisioned during the planning stages. These included conversations with education officials on routine visits, a visiting math consultant from the United Kingdom, an early childhood consultant working with the University of the West Indies' Caribbean Child Development Centre (CCDC), colleagues around the world, other children attending the school, children enrolled in other Kindergarten classrooms on the island, curious parents with children enrolled in other kindergarten classrooms and work samples/drawings on the chalk board from children not enrolled in my class. I also benefited from the queries, thoughts and comments E-mailed to me from my University of Alberta colleagues and mentors. All of these provided food for reflection and have no doubt enhanced my ability to gain additional insights into early childhood teaching.

Written Sources

I was keen to learn about teaching by considering the impact it had on children's learning. From their exercise books I was able to secure some drawings and anecdotes. The "All about me" scrapbooks initially planned were abandoned early in the first term. The scrapbooks were made from a collection of papers held together by a green tag, thus they were fragile and easily destroyed. However, using their exercise books we were able to record information regarding each child's version of specific classroom discussions. During these discussions children used their words, scribbles, drawings, photos or artifacts made of plasticine to document among other things: "I am happy…" ; How do you feel to be back at school after the holidays?: "I am …"; "At school I like to …"; "The best or favourite part of a day or week at school is…"; "I like school when…". I kept a daily log/description (field notes) of the various activities such as conversations with children, their parents, visitors, other educators and interested or curious individuals. Instead of using a separate book as a journal I wrote my reflections, autobiographical writings such as thoughts, initial interpretations, questions and notes to myself in red coloured ink close to the relevant descriptive entry. As soon as possible after each audio and video recording I replayed and made field and reflective notes that helped me to be a more focused observer the next day. I made a note in my log/journal book as soon as possible after I took a photograph so that when viewing the photo, time was saved recalling its original context (figure 1). A visitors' journal was in the classroom among the mayhem on my teacher's table but I was often so overwhelmed that only after the visitor(s) left I remembered it existed. On some of these occasions I was able to reflect on the conversations with the parents, other teachers, administrators, and other students in the journal pieces in my logbook. On other occasions I contacted the visitors after and was able to receive written feedback from a few of them. I tried to be a record keeper of the life in the classroom and not just the progress in relation to the formal curriculum as indicated by test scores.

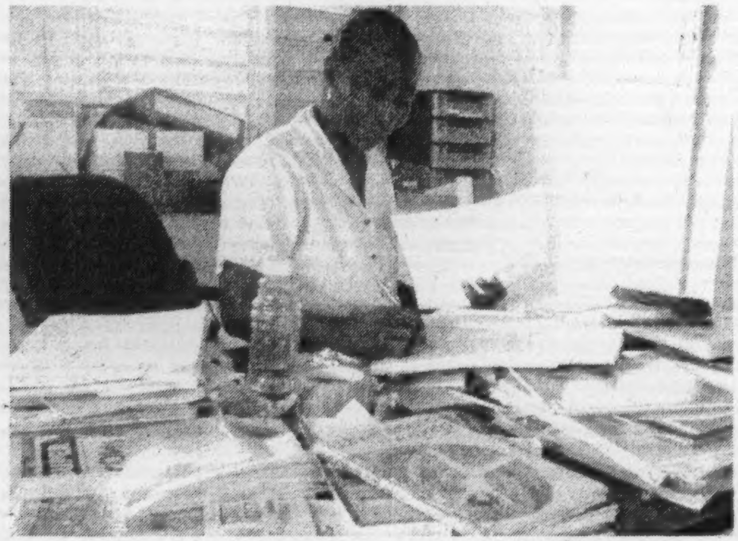

Figure1. *Teacher-researcher caught by a student making a note in researcher log/journal at "untidy" teacher table during break time. Classroom entrance door is to the right.*

On occasions when I felt insecure about the state of my space in the classroom, I thought of Martha, the primary grade teacher in Goldstein's (1998) article, *Caught in the* *middle: Tension and contradiction in enacting the primary grade* curriculum. Like Martha, I needed easy access to materials during classroom activities. My classroom space was crowded with a variety of texts, resource books including picture dictionaries and materials, a stockpile of activity sheets, notes, drawings and various other items given to me by the children, puzzles, games, blocks, crayons, library books, books from my private collection and books the children wanted me to read to the class, hymn books, boxes storing craft materials and extra writing paper and various half-completed projects. As much as I tried organizing my space it would soon be "messed up" once again. Moreover, stopping to tidy up seemed to interrupt the flow of our ideas.

Alternative Sources

Technology such as audio and video recorders and cameras supplemented the writing skills of the children. Constructions the children made using blocks and playdough were observed during craft or free play sessions. On a few occasions I audio and/or videotaped classroom conversations. It was sometimes the case that discussions were either at their climax or over before I remembered to activate the tape recorders. Most notably was during the visit of the two top officials from the Ministry of Education (the Permanent Secretary and the Director) accompanied by the Head Teacher. An interesting discussion began with a statement made by one of the students, Y'lene, when she started to explain what we had done earlier in the morning before they visited. In instances like this I have had to rely more on my written reflections and the reflections of the visitors than I had anticipated.

In the end though, not using audio or videotape was a conscious decision. Even after 10 weeks the children still got very emotional and over excited whenever I began video taping and I abandoned such pursuits. More productive was the children's own use of photography as a means for me to learn about their perspective (Cook & Hess, 2007). Each child was assigned exclusive use of a digital camera for a day in order to take photos of interest to them around the school or classroom. From these photographs I was able to prompt conversations with and among the children, providing additional access to their perspectives. During September to December we held conferences where we viewed each child's photos on the computer while they told their story to the entire group. Some of the photos were hard to decipher and children were unable to discuss the reasons for the photos they took. Interestingly, the children's photos were mainly of people, and were posed rather that spontaneous: subjects included children from other classes, the lunch workers, the school's gardener, nursery school teachers and anyone who was available in the schoolyard.

Because I wanted to understand the kinds of activities they enjoyed doing at school, I structured their camera-time differently in the January to March session. A limit of four photos was set to encourage them to observe and reflect prior to taking a photograph. Again, individual and group conferences were held using photographs, drawings, and 3D models made of blocks, play dough and found objects to allow them to reveal the significance thus shedding more light onto their schooling experiences. Even so, the photo conferences were not as revealing as I had anticipated. During viewing sessions the children merely identified the subject or photographer and commented on the quality of the photos: "I took those" or "Look Parique and Tiano and Head Teacher", "Who tek teacha picha? (Who took teacher's picture?)" "Da picha de no tek good. (That picture wasn't taken properly)". My questioning often seemed an intrusion into their excitement of viewing the photos, and the questions seemed false. I had been present at the time the photos were taken, and the children knew I should know what was happening and why (Ellis, 1998b). Children revealed more during conferences centered on their conversations, drawings, and play-dough and block creations. However, the photographs did have real value later, as memory aids when I revisited experiences. The photos also helped in discussions with the children's parents.

Informal Conversations

No formal interviews were conducted. Instead we engaged in many conversations and conferences provoked and guided by the children's work, photos, statements and questions. These conversations or conferences with the entire group, small groups, individual students and/or parents were necessary as a means to define, explore and help me to gain deeper clarification of drawings, photos, statements, questions and models made of plasticine or blocks. Because I was operating like a *bricoleur,* it was not very difficult for me to rely more on written description in place of video recordings and to extend the data collection period by six weeks. I also tried to imagine and assume various perspectives from time to time throughout the project.

Data Analysis

Presenting data in narrative form provided a window through which I could see what "it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). My field text, journal entries, and visitors' reflections were supplemented with the personal stories of my teaching and the kindergarten children. In the process, I established solidarity with the kindergarteners. This has also helped me to better understand and articulate my teaching and learning philosophy.

I found the children's work and my observations and journaling revealed ideas that were analyzed as themes. In order to discern the specific values, concerns, pre-dispositions and ways of proceeding with the inquiry, connections were identified across themes as described in Chapter 5. In this process I reflected and asked myself questions while simultaneously trying to gain deeper levels of understanding of each cluster/theme. During this phase I was often led to revisit course readings, do additional literature searches, rethink the clustering of data, the labels for the clusters/themes and review some data that I previously thought were insignificant. These clusters were embellished with examples of children's work to give a sense of life in the classroom (Aronson, 1994).

"Self-reflection clarifies better than any mirror" (Caruana, 2002, p. 127). I especially appreciated the feedback, questions and discussions that forced me to rethink or do further research in order to state more clearly the point I had made. Particularly notable was a discussion I had with Donna, an alumnus of the University of Alberta who is an Early Childhood Education consultant in the Caribbean. We spoke in late February as I was about to terminate data collection. We were discussing how most teachers we knew seemed to dislike having administrators and researchers in their classrooms. However, I was convinced that children liked visitors in their classroom. To this she remarked that she thought the children's behaviour towards visitors varied from locale to locale and had to do more with the school or teacher's receptiveness to visitors. This discussion caused me to realize the magnitude of a teachers' influence. A teacher's personality and philosophy may play a more important role than the knowledge he/she possesses. Nakamura says it wonderfully: "the words that you speak and how you say them, your body language, your facial expressions all have an impact on the atmosphere you create for each student and the class as a whole" (as cited in James-Reid, 2003, p. 93).

I was deeply concerned with transforming my personal perceptions of teaching and learning. Self-reflection created opportunities to assess my experiences and insights, and as such this is a portrait of my experience. Interweaving examples of the children's experiences with related literature allowed me to create what I hope is a valuable story, through which readers are able to comprehend my process, understanding, and motivation (Aronson, 1994).

The process of my inquiry was by no means linear. Interpretation allowed me to constantly reflect on questions during the process that necessitated a going back and forth during data collection and analysis. I drew on my knowledge of theory and practice to create my interpretations, which involved constant writing and rewriting of the analyzed data (Schliermacher, 1977; van Manen, 1990). In the words of van Manen "the process of writing and rewriting (including revising and editing) is more reminiscent of the artistic activity of creating an art object" (p. 131).

In an effort to seek clarity and avoid straying from the purpose of the study, I undertook analysis very early during the data collection phase. I started by identifying similarities. Very often I wrote notes to myself in red next to the descriptive entries in my journal. This is referred to by Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) as memoing. These memos helped me to recall in some instances and led me to seek clarifications in others. Another in-the-field data-analysis strategy I used involved continuously discussing and conferencing with participants, visitors, and research colleagues. Such informal conversations actually helped to clarify my thinking and identify areas of greater or lesser importance. After data collection ceased, revisiting the data led to a regrouping and refining of themes in a process of coding. Thus, analysis involved grouping and regrouping data, writing and rewriting, searching for connections to theory, researching, reading and reviewing related literature.

Limitations of the Study

Teaching is context specific and as a result this study reflects the time, history, culture and experiences of the teacher-researcher, students, parents and other community members. The composition of the kindergarten class was entirely determined by the parents who registered their children to attend this particular Government Primary School for the 2005- 2006 academic year. Partly because of the desire to contact the parents in July, I was given access to the first fifteen children who were assigned to Grade K. This is by no means representative of all kindergarten classrooms in Montserrat.

This study was further limited by the variety and use of materials. Child-centred education as it is practiced and promoted in Western countries is often dependent on a rich array of "developmentally appropriate" materials. The resources normally available to kindergarten teachers in Montserrat are limited and mainly consist of chalkboards, chalk, reading books, curriculum guides, papers, crayons and markers, which are mainly for teacher use. Parents are responsible for providing children's school supplies (exercise books and pencils). Because I aimed to develop a program that respects the realities of the teaching context in Montserrat, I supplemented the usual materials with found and recycled items sourced locally. I provided paper, scissors, magnifying glasses, crayons, plasticine, craft materials, dice, floor puzzles in addition to stickers and other little trinkets traditionally used as tokens for good efforts and hard work in Montserratian classrooms.

In qualitative inquiry "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). Therefore, in order to produce a rich descriptive text, not only as the researcher but also as the teacher, it was impossible for me to capture all relevant stories around the classroom at any given time. I found the pictures taken during the children's camera time very helpful in embellishing, supporting and triangulating the data.

My dual roles in this project limited my ability to observe the children as much as I would have liked. This was reflected in the limited amount of field notes taken as my role as teacher always took priority. Every effort was made to collect a variety of data from the participants over the course of the study. The writing ability of the children limited the originality, creativity and variety of some data because during oral group discussions children were often guided by the responses of their classmates. Data collection was also affected by what I as the teacher-researcher was aware of in the classroom. This also dictated the number and type of samples that were collected and used as data. The analysis is influenced by my perception of knowledge, learning, early childhood education, childhood and the role of the early childhood practitioner. "What happens in a classroom is more intuition than rational or based on scientific reasoning" (Jackson, 1968, p. 145).

Although classrooms are separate self-contained rooms physically, my Kindergarten class was far from being isolated socially. As a class community, we were one of two kindergarten classes in addition to being a part of the general Brades Primary School's community and the wider Montserrat society. As a result I was always conscious and cautious when embarking on some activities, taking care to involve parents and community members as well as the other kindergarten teacher.

Parent involvement is encouraged and highly valued in early education (Fraser, 2005). However, despite being a relatively close-knit community, Montserrat traditionally separates parents and the general public from school's daily activities, though they are keen to be aware of their child's achievement. Based on Paley's (1997) experience with her students, I dreamt of asking parents or other members of the community to assist with the daily Literacy Hour. During Literacy Hour, we read and discussed stories. Most mornings, this was done with the other class immediately after the morning assembly. I felt it would have been awkward to ask parents and community members on behalf of my class and at the same time impose my idea on the other kindergarten teacher. She had picked up on some of my ideas and as such I did not want to dominate decisions. We sometimes extended our morning sessions, Music, Art and Craft periods to allow the children to play more in the classroom, listen, sing and dance to recorded music and nursery rhymes outside of the regulated music session. The children in my class already had access to more resources than the other class so I tried to be cautious in promoting my ideas. Because there were two Kindergarten classes, I found myself from time to time ensuring that I lived up to the academic pace of the other class. On some occasions I quickly exposed my class to topics that the other class had already done without a natural flow and/or integrated approach. At times like these I had to resort to a more teacher-fronted style. I also had to make sure they had this knowledge as they had to do the same test. Fortunately, in some instances, opportunities later manifested where integration helped to deepen understanding.

In January, a new student enrolled in the class and therefore did not have the opportunity to join the study. Although she was involved in all the class activities I had to postpone the exit reflection and celebration. This was to ensure that the non-participating student and her parent did not feel slighted since they were never informed about the study. Another consideration for postponing this meeting was because I did not want parents to expect this feature from other teachers in subsequent years. Although they are aware of the study their continued collaboration throughout the year may have blurred the separation.

CHAPTER 4

RE-ENTERING THE KINDERGARTEN

A New Start

The start of the 2005-2006 academic year in Montserrat was momentous. August 28, 2005 will be remembered for the official opening of the new purpose-built Montserrat Community College providing technical and post secondary education to the residents in Montserrat following an eight year closure. One week later it was back to school for Montserrat's children. The list of educational institutions on the island expanded further to include a new private school catering to Kindergarten and Grade One students and a government-operated Nursery school, both in the village of Salem. Salem borders the safe and exclusion zones and had for several months between 1997 and 1998 been a part of the exclusion zone. A map showing the location of schools is located in Appendix A.

The school year was also momentous for me. Professionally, it marked my re-entry into the classroom as a teacher and my first experience as a teacher-researcher after my two years of residency at the University of Alberta. Personally, it meant that I was a "physically present" mother to my son, and financially, it meant that I was once again receiving a salary and greater financial security.

Brades School and the Kindergarten Classroom

Prior to 1995, Brades was a rural village but has since become the centre of commercial activity. The school is near to the Ministry of Agriculture and a small bakery. There is a Nursery School in Block D on the Brades School Compound. The school is within walking distance of the Government's plant nursery, Montserrat Electricity Services Power Plant, Public Works Department's mechanical workshop, several furniture makers' workshops and a print shop. The current hub of government, the Government Headquarters Complex which houses the main Post Office, the Ministry of Education, the Court House, Her Majesty's Prison, and the main Royal Montserrat Police and Search and Rescue (Fire) Stations can be viewed from the school and are a mere two minutes walk away (Appendix B). The Governor, the Queen's Representative on the island, has offices in the vicinity of the Government Headquarters complex and is also within walking distance of the school.

Teachers are able to choose between individual or double desks for their classroom. I chose individual desks as I have found them to be more versatile. They are about half the size of the others and easier to arrange in a myriad of ways. A chalk board (2.5 m x 1.3 m) was mounted on one wall and another one (1.3 m x 1.1 m) on the opposite wall that I converted into a bulletin board by adding a layer of cork. Although teachers are free to position the students' desks as they wish, they are usually arranged to face the main chalkboard which traditionally was the front of the classroom. While preparing the classroom I was assisted by four older students and it was interesting to note that they independently arranged the desks and chairs in straight rows facing the chalkboard (Figure 2).

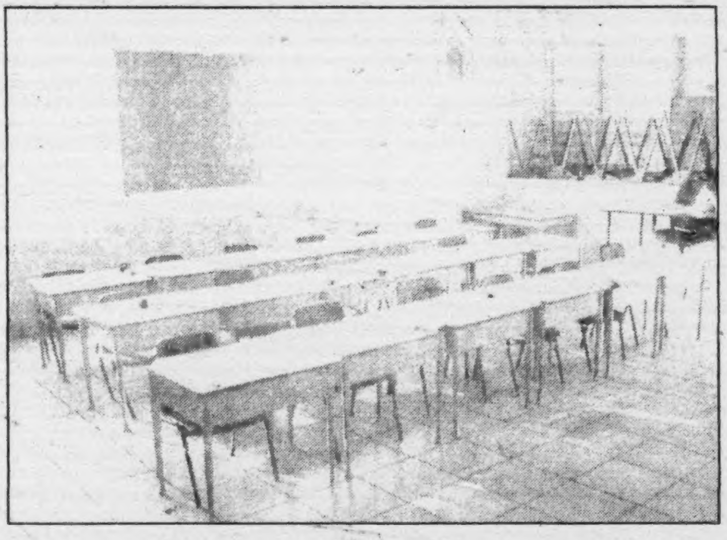

Figure 2. *Initial desk arrangement of rows facing the big chalkboard and small chalkboard layered with cork in the back of the classroom*

One colleague commented that the children had done a great job. In our culture classroom life revolves around the teacher and the chalkboard so it was natural for the children to place the desks facing the chalkboard. This is something I probably would not have noticed prior to reading Bray (1997) and Bray and Packer (1993) which suggested that in using this formation, some children's view of the board and teacher were often obstructed by their classmates' heads. Cookson Jr. (2006) helped me understand that "the logic of such a classroom design was that knowledge sprang solely from the teacher" (p. 15). I was eager to divert some of this attention away from myself, and more towards the students. Although the classroom was relatively small (8.4 m x 6.1 m) for an early childhood setting, I tried to arrange the desks to provide floor space for the manipulation of large toys and puzzles.

Initially, desks were arranged in groups of four (Figure 3) but some children were having a difficult time seeing each other during oral discussions. Eventually, and for the majority of the data collection period, they were rearranged in a horseshoe/semi-circular formation, allowing each child to have a better view, not only of the chalkboard and the teacher but each other. The chalkboard was neither the centre of all educational activity nor the main educational technology employed. Other technology included radios, digital cameras, bulletin boards, board games, toys, puzzles, computers, musical instruments and audio and video recorders and players. The open space enclosed by the desks (Figure 4) was used for group and floor sessions such as doing large puzzles, group discussions, playing with large toys and literacy reading hour. A rug was sometimes placed in this space (Figure 5) for sitting during some activities while the chairs were grouped there on other occasions.

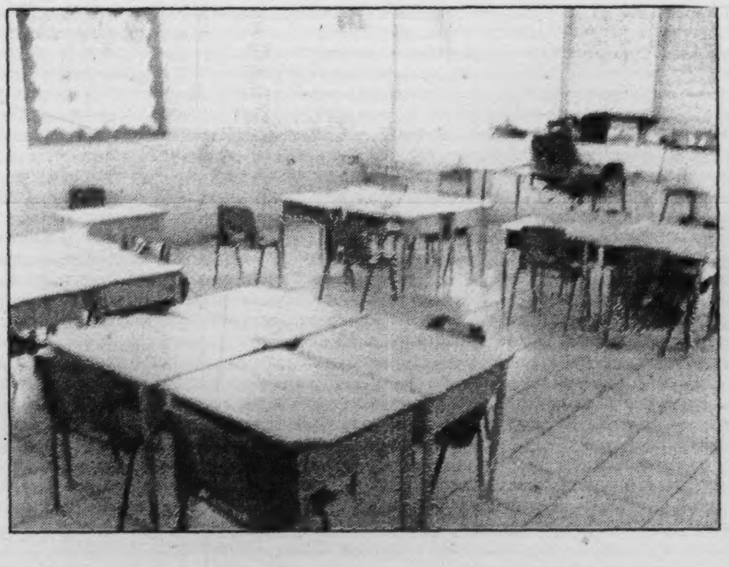

Figure 3. *Desks arranged in sets of four*

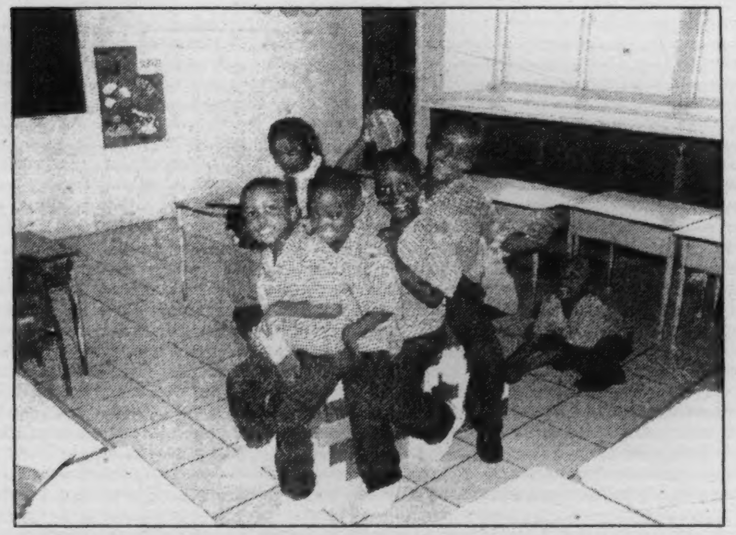

Figure 4. *Children playing on floor inside the desk arrangement*

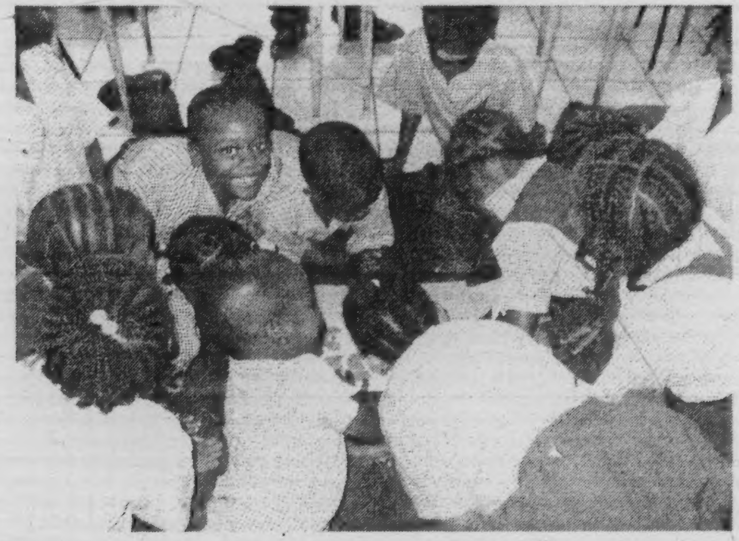

Figure 5. *Children on rug inside desk arrangement doing floor puzzle*

By December the children apparently thought it was a waste of time to arrange the rug for seating and it became a common practice to simply sit on the uncovered tiled floor to do the activities of their choice (Figures 6, 7 and 8). On occasion children would even lie on the floor to write, read and colour to the dismay of other adults and myself. I believe our adult concern was more about getting clothes dirty than about the children being comfortable, learning and enjoying their activity.

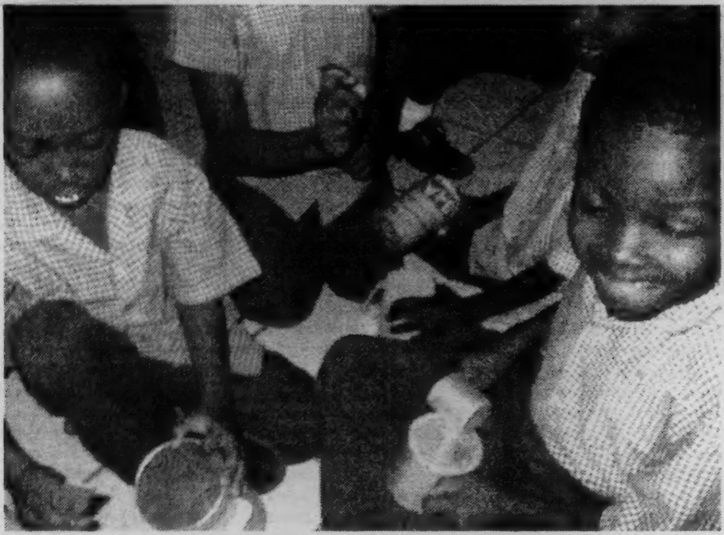

Figure 6. *A few boys on the tiled floor making music with objects found in the classroom*

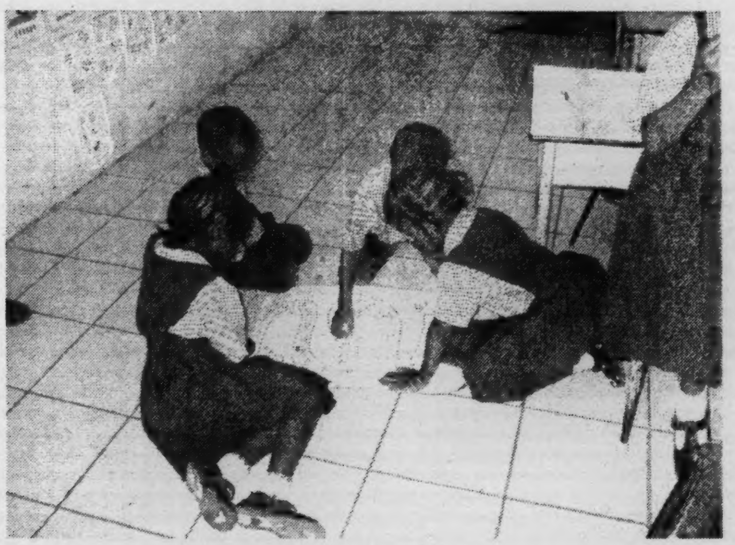

Figure 7. *Children playing teacher-made game on the tiled floor without rug*

Figure 8. Children playing on tiled floor

Looking into the classroom through the only door situated on the south west of the classroom, the desks could be seen arranged facing the front of the classroom where the larger board is located. A large table filled with my resources sits between the western wall of the classroom and the children's desks. There was a class library complete with seating in the north western corner (Figure 9). This little area housed a collection of books and a bench that could seat at least four children at one time. Once in this area children were expected to talk softly and be engaged with reading material either individually or with a partner(s).

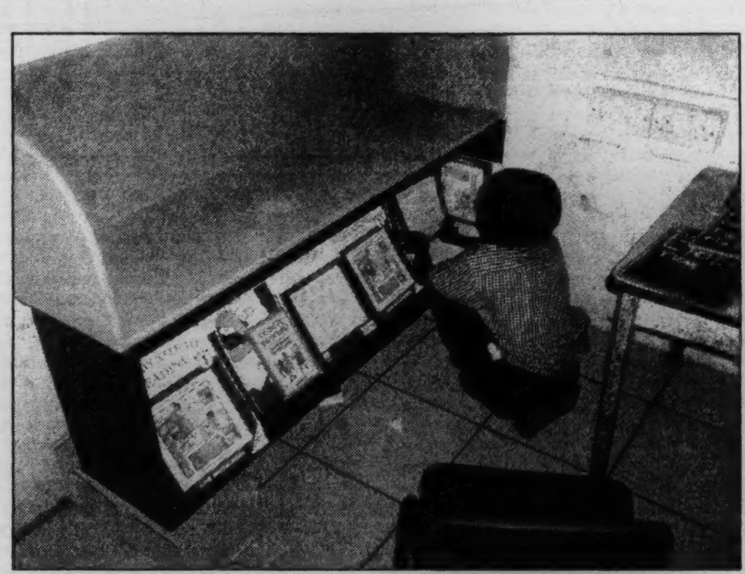

Figure 9. *Library corner / writing area*

A table nearby housed bits of papers, worksheets, pencils, crayons, slates and bits of chalk for children's use at their convenience. There were deep windowsills on the eastern and western sides of the classroom. Large building blocks were kept on the western windowsill and it was common to see the children making and displaying their creations here (Figure 10).

Figure 10. *Boys playing on top of the windowsill dressed in red and jeans on St Valentine's Day, 2006*

The eastern window sill behind the teacher's table was always overflowing with various "teacher items" that were supposed to be off bounds to the children including the radio/CD/cassette player, cameras, CDs, story books, resource materials and a portable four drawer storage. Scissors, magnifying glasses and dice, were kept in the two lower drawers to which the children had access. The two upper drawers stored chalk, extra pencils, reward stickers, glitters and were out of bounds to the children. Plants were also kept on both windowsills. Children's work and teacher-made charts were displayed on all sides of the classroom. Readiness worksheets requiring children to colour, a standard element in Montserratian kindergarten, were a vital component of activities in the first term. Based on one letter of the alphabet at a time, they were used to help develop fine motor skills, demonstrate letter-sound correspondence and build vocabulary. The completed sheets were used to help personalize our classroom walls and celebrate children's individual work. Bulletin board displays were designed and prepared by the teacher based on a holiday or historical information, for example, the 'discovery' of Montserrat by Christopher Columbus (Figure 11). Children assisted with the mounting of the displays and took part in the associated discussions.

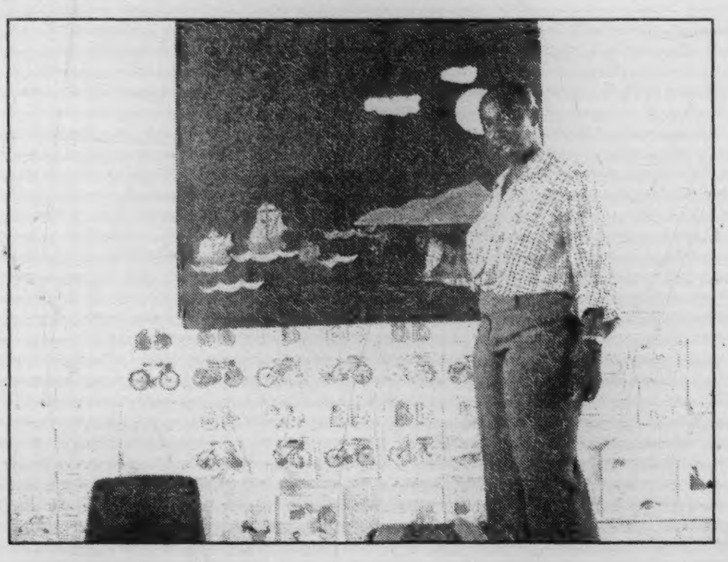

Figure 11. *Bulletin board display demonstrating the discovery of Montserrat with children's work displayed on adjacent walls*

A floor plan of the classroom is included in Appendix F. Figures 12-14 were taken by the children at various times during the study showing the classroom and surrounding space.

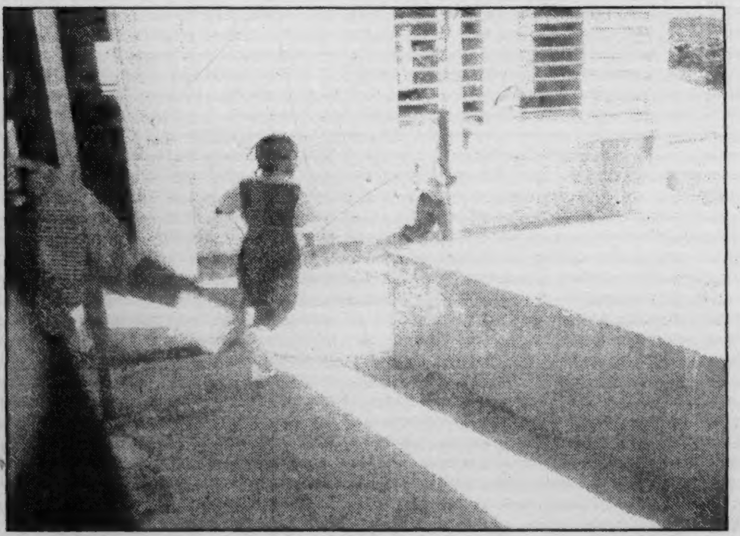

Figure 12. *Children playing just outside of the classroom*

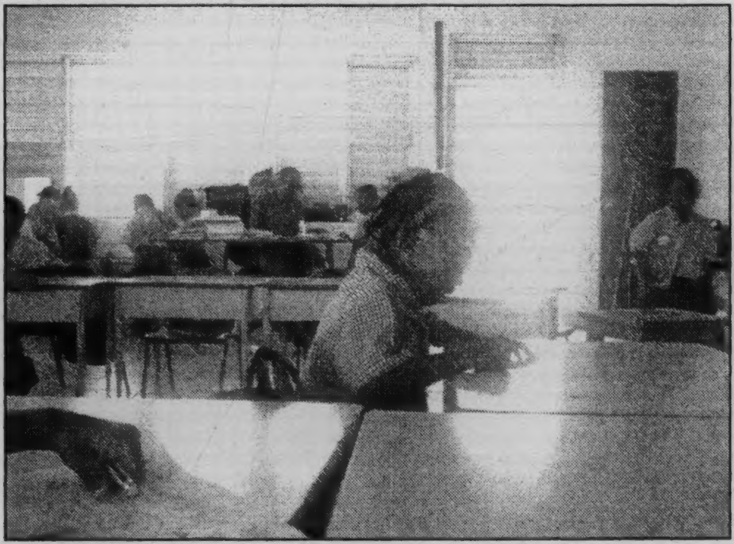

Figure 13. *Looking from west to east in the classroom*

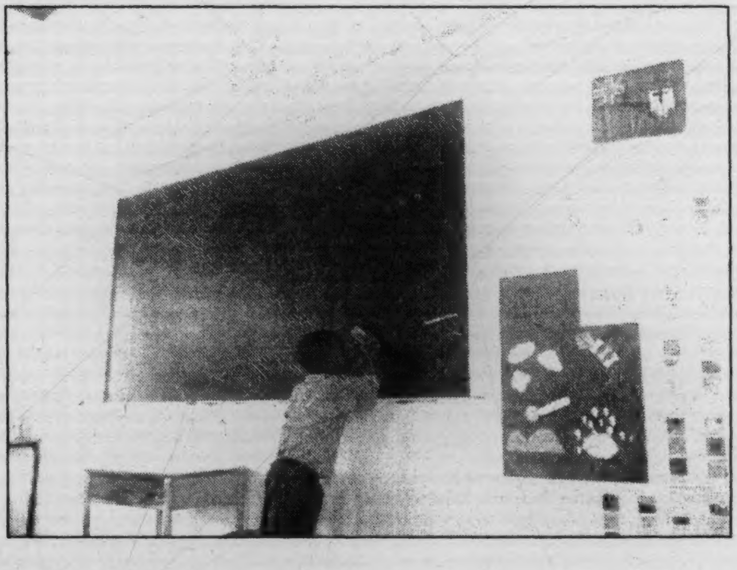

Figure 14. *Bigger chalkboard at the front of the classroom*

Beginnings

On day one, 13 of the 16 students on my list showed up for school: one was still in England with his family on vacation and two had since registered to attend the new private school, while an additional student joined us. I was unable to contact all of the parents during the vacation since some had already left for overseas trips by the time the initial preparations were completed in July. As a result I found myself soliciting participation from about four parents including those of the new student on the first day of school. I received verbal approval from fourteen of the fifteen students now on the register but only three consent forms were returned on the first day of classes. Consequently, Week 1 was spent getting acquainted with each other and the rigours of life at "big school".

Re-entering the classroom as a teacher required more adjustment than I anticipated. Although it was the same school I left two years ago, there were changes. I needed to get to know the new Director of Education, the Education Officer responsible for curriculum, and the Head Teacher. There were also new literacy and numeracy strategies that had been introduced from the United Kingdom. In addition to these changes, managing fifteen energetic 4 and 5 year olds left me with little time to consider my research. I used the early days to get acquainted with the students, their parents and the school environment. Although the roles of teacher and researcher were not completely detached, there were certain obligations I had as a teacher that were separate and took precedence. For example, first and foremost, as an employee of the government I had a responsibility to "teach" according to the curriculum and local traditions. Children were expected to be able to "read" call words and write as soon as possible in their exercise books. As a researcher more interested in relationships, my primary focus was to develop a quality network of social relationships within our classroom community through conversation, communication and collaboration. The quality of the relationships was vital for achieving the overall goals and objectives: children's growth and development. The reasons for observing children were different. As a teacher I observed in order to take follow up action, while as a researcher it was to enable later reflection before action.

As established earlier, classroom life revolves around the chalkboard and the teacher in Montserrat. I believe that my initial lure to teach was probably the pursuit of power, to be in charge of something and someone. I wanted to be a queen in my own 'palace.' Fortunately for the children, I have changed and I am still changing. I am eager to divert some of this attention and power from myself and more towards the students and their interests.

In early September I prepared an extent with the other kindergarten teacher at the school. In the absence of a documented meaning for the expression "extent", a retired colleague and I concluded that the term was most likely derived from its purpose being a teacher's or school's work plan for an extended period. It details the goals for each subject area for a specific period, which can be per month or term depending on the Head Teacher's preference. We prepared monthly extents (Appendix G). Extents are given to the Head Teacher for approval by the 5th day of each month. Based on the extent, we prepared daily lesson plans for our respective classes. Lesson plans are expected to contain details of the lesson's objective(s), content of the lesson, the resources that will be used, and the method for carrying out the instructional activity including the evaluation or culminating activity. In some instances the previous and following lessons' objectives are also included. The Director of Education, Education Officers and Head Teachers inspect lesson plan books from time to time.

During teacher training, I learned that a sign of progress as a classroom teacher was a request by my supervisor to limit the amount of details presented in written lesson plans. The first required plans were very detailed and included questions I planned to ask, anticipated students' responses and my responses to their responses. At the completion of my teaching practicum I was only required to write the lessons' objectives and the activity that accompanied the lessons. As a new teacher in my own classroom in Montserrat I wrote daily lesson plans for each subject then listed on the timetable (Phonics, Vocabulary, Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Comprehension, Composition, Mathematics, Social Studies, Health and Natural Science). I rarely followed the plans as written hence this proved a waste of valuable time. Consequently, I began using more of my time making teaching aids: games, worksheets, puzzles, bulletin board displays and sourcing relevant stories, resource personnel and other instructional aids instead of preparing detailed lesson plans that were mainly for inspection by my superiors. Standard lesson plans served to block my understanding of the lived curriculum as experienced in collaboration with real children (Aoki, 2005).

It was only after reading *The boy who would be a helicopter* by Paley (1990) that it became apparent to me that the type of lesson plans a teacher writes depends on whose approval is sought. Forced to reflect on the reasons why I do the things I do during this study, I can see more clearly why I shifted my approach to lesson planning. Like Paley, "when I was a new teacher, it was the principal's [Head Teachers', Education Officers', and Director of Education's] approval I sought" (p. 122), hence the detailed lesson plans. As I became a more seasoned teacher, it seemed that I began to crave more of the children's approval and it then became necessary to concentrate more on the children's individual needs and differences. In this research, in trying to understand more clearly how teachers and students experience school, I am in effect not only aiming to be a better teacher but also to be a more liked, for as Paley concluded, "I could not teach much to anyone unless the person liked me a lot" (p. 122).

Detailed lesson plans are written from only a teacher's perspective and they most often expect similar outcomes from the entire group. On the other hand a flexible lesson plan allows room for the children's perspective, individualized interpretations, moods and outcomes to have an effect on the activity. In my opinion, based on social-constructivist principles, lesson plans should not be used as the only indicators of what a teacher does in the classroom. Supervisors should ideally spend more time observing classroom practice in addition to inspecting children's exercise books and interacting with students in order to effectively assess a teacher's performance.

Since my plans changed based on students' contributions, I often only wrote notes as a guide and to keep a record of the activity. As a result, to the chagrin of some of my supervisors, I sometimes only wrote an objective, another time only the activity and another time the content to be covered. On other occasions I documented the activity after the lesson. Although it felt like the right thing to do as Jackson (1968) says, it seemed that I had no real structure. But I felt I was co-constructing knowledge with my students and creating curricula of life grounded in the children's immediate daily world, "as well as in the larger social, political contexts of their lives" (Portelli and Vibert, 2001, p. 63). My planning style reflected my belief that classrooms are learning communities where members learn from and with each other, thereby "enhanc[ing] the development of children, teachers, families and the community in which they live" (New, 2002, p. 259). A teachers' role is to "influence" (Noddings, 1984, p. 177), encourage, support and scaffold, rather than transmit expert knowledge. I also found out that if we work with our students, we will become committed to them, care for them and "set them free to pursue (their) legitimate projects" (Noddings, 1984, p. 177) as Paley (1997) so excellently did with Reeney and her classmates. It was an enlightening moment when I realized that there were names to use to label the things I had been experimenting with in the classroom over the years. Things were not being done simply because they felt good, there were reasons for doing them that can be articulated.

Detailed well-defined lesson plans are often prepared in relation to cumulative tests. They are attempts to 'cover' the curriculum and not maximize student understanding of concepts. They tend to focus more on teachers' perspectives of the curriculum, whereas I prefer to plan in relation to children's learning interests and style as these intersect with the formal curriculum. This requires a "balance between guiding children's learning and following their lead" (Chang, 2005, p. 221). Writing fewer details in my plans for the day's activities encouraged me to listen more to the children. This is congruent with Greves' (2005) notion that teachers ought to be sensitive to issues that are more important to students than a lesson plan.

During the study I planned with a little more detail than usual because I was conscious of my planning as part of my research. However, because I was aiming for an integrated, child-focused curriculum, I tried to be flexible. On the Monday of the second week, I asked students to bring their favorite story or book to share with the rest of the class. The response was better than I anticipated: four children brought books on Tuesday, three on Wednesday, three on Thursday and four on Friday. Interestingly, all of these books provided opportunities to integrate a variety of subject areas. I was regaining my confidence as a kindergarten teacher.

One of the desired skills for an investigator engaged in case study research is the need to be "adaptive and flexible, so that newly encountered situations can be seen as opportunities, not threats" (Yin, 1994, p. 56). In thinking of this, during the second week I decided to continue to use the first several weeks of the school year to get further settled into my teacher role, postponing the start of data collection until week four. Although my roles as both teacher and researcher were combined, there were some instances especially during the first few weeks when it was more important to concentrate on my obligations and duties as teacher. At other times it was more important for me to expend more energy recording and reflecting on my research. Since qualitative researchers must be prepared to make and remake decisions in the field I felt well positioned to make such a decision (Boostrom, 1994; Stake, 2000, Yin, 1994).

I knew that in interviews, children may provide information they think we expect (Ellis, 1998b). This prompted me to pay attention to children's conversations as they arose as in the following two examples. One day, I started a discussion by asking why they were in school. Jhenece responded that it was to learn to read and write so she could go to University like her Auntie. Later in the week the same child was complaining that another was not playing with her, seeming to shift her attention from her future academic career to friendships. Parique, whose mother told me the first morning that he didn't want to come to school because he can't write, was able to boast by the second day that he helped his new friend Tiano, who was repeating kindergarten, to do his colouring. Children wanted to feel that they belonged, that they were somebody's friend, and capable of doing something. They wanted to be part of a safe and caring community (Craig, 1995).

By the end of week two, I only had three consent forms left to collect, although I had verbal consent from all but one child's parents. I made daily records and reflections in addition to a weekly update to my supervisor. I also continued to read and found comfort in Ellis (1998a) who wrote: "writing about their research can give teachers the chance to question, clarify and extend their own understandings about their work with students" (p.6). This reaffirmed my reason for undertaking this research and reignited my passion to continue to reflect on my teaching.

By the start of week three, all of the students were present at school. Because of a family emergency one traveled to England on Tuesday of that week and was absent for two weeks. All but one consent form had been returned. This was the last student to enroll in the class, and I was not sure if they would participate as the parents had not yet given oral consent. I therefore started collecting data with fourteen participants.

In my role as teacher I found myself starting to reclaim the classroom as my 'palace' during this week. As researcher, I was driven to re-read Boostrom (1994). I was worried because although I had identified few memorable events, I was having a rough time determining what was noteworthy for research purposes. According to Boostrom, it is common that at this stage for researchers to "see events within the general structure" (p. 53) of classroom and school life. This made it easier to understand why I was operating without any particular focus, and I kept only brief daily notes and reflections.

An episode during this stage concerned a child named Firen, who continuously expressed a desire to become a teacher during informal conversations with her mother and me. I observed her during a free activity/play session conducting school with three other girls, and she was, of course, the teacher (Figure 15).

Figure 15. *Girls playing school in September*

On several occasions during these first three weeks she complained about being tired and expressed a desire to complete paper activities that included writing and colouring at home. She would then circulate around the class ensuring that her classmates were completing the work, the same work that she had not yet completed. She could also be heard giving the others commands to follow. Although not excited about doing this "work" herself, she played the role of teacher. It was only later that I paid closer attention to the meaning of this, as she portrayed the teacher as a highly knowledgeable authority figure.

Although I aimed to have the children actively share the authority in the classroom with me, I was still wrestling with letting go the concept of the classroom as my 'palace'. Thinking back on this episode of the girls' play of school so early in the school year helped me reflect on my words and actions with the children. I tried to avoid actions that were not contributing to their learning but were merely for my satisfaction as the person in charge and in control. I had to shift the notion of the classroom as 'palace' to the classroom as a town hall where the children all had a right to contribute. In an effort to share the classroom with the children, my management strategies changed. Despite doubts expressed by some observers, the children did continue to learn as indicated on test scores.

Prior to starting data collection, I found myself preoccupied with thinking about possible formats for my final report. I also spent a considerable amount of time revisiting aspects of my graduate coursework and doing literature searches on relevant topics. I thought that this was unnatural, seeing that this period was assigned to data collection, until I re-encountered Yin's (1994b) assertion that "each investigator must be concerned, throughout the conduct of a case study, with the design of the final case study report" (p. 73). Yin also stated that in case study research there "is a continuous interaction between the theoretical issues being studied and the data being collected" (p. 55). I tried to reflect and interpret life in the classroom on an ongoing basis. Revisiting the literature during this phase helped to increase my confidence in the research process.

Discussing my study with colleagues and friends around the world helped me to further focus on "learning as relationship." In response to my E-mail relating the postponement of data collection, a colleague responded, "Those first few weeks are so important for developing a learning community" (Green, Personal communication September, 2005). I was then drawn to re-read Huber and Clandinin's (2004) article identifying five conditions for an educative experience: meeting the other as a person, negotiating meaning, establishing safe places, giving back the story, and inquiring narratively.

I tried in the first three weeks to meet my students as individuals and friends. If I was re-entering the kindergarten, they were making their first entry into formal school culture and they needed support. We took this time to discuss our expectations for each other, our likes, dislikes and the kindergarten experience. We undertook a group project creating a map of Montserrat, labeling the places where we lived, decorating our individual cut-out houses and mounting them on the map (Figure 16). During this time we not only began learning about our island home but also about how to work together, each others' names, where we lived in Montserrat and a little about each other's immediate families. This was necessary since the children had attended a variety of nursery institutions both on and off the island before commencing kindergarten.

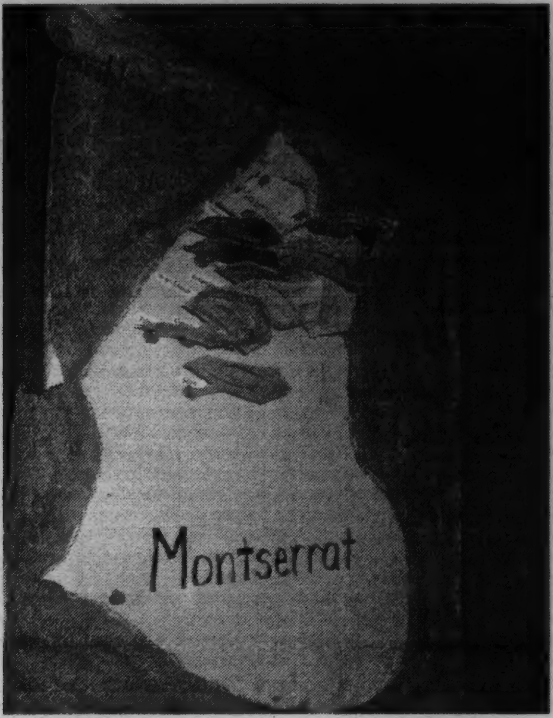

Figure 16. *Map showing coloured houses identifying where we lived on the island*

We tried to establish some guidelines for behavior and made the environment comfortable and appealing by re-arranging the desks to suit our needs. Children chose their own seats and we personalized the classroom with our own creations that included our photographs (Figure 17).

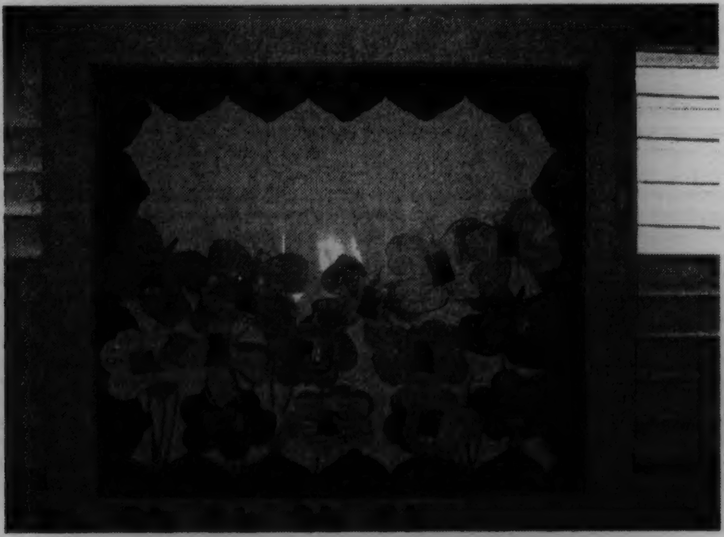

Figure 17. *September's bulletin board displaying photos of each class member including teacher*

It was apparent early on that children felt comfortable enough to use chalk and draw on the board, which is customarily off limits and reserved for teacher's use or use with teacher's permission. Despite my request to stay away from my table, children often used it for their things or to write when they felt so inclined. My field notes at this time contained questions concerning what seemed to be my ambiguity about sharing the classroom. If my desire was to share control of the class with them, why was I deciding that some sections and materials were off limits? Why was I constantly reminding them of "off limit zones" although they were not safety hazards? These pleas were largely ignored. I came to interpret their free use of the chalkboard, and the teacher's table and its contents as their way of indicating that they were truly safe and comfortable in the classroom. It is also possible to interpret these actions as an assertion of their rights to occupy the entire space.

Integrating Subjects and the Idea of Collage

Integrating subject matter was foremost on my mind, but the children's assistance in this surprised me. They easily made connections from very early in the school year across traditional subject areas. An example was recorded in my notes:

> *In our school system young ones are not usually afforded time to use scissors on a regular basis. This may be mainly because of the focus on writing and lack of appropriate child-safe scissors. However, I was able to purchase enough scissors for the class so I was able to introduce a cutting session last week. This has since become an often requested activity.*
>
> *One child made a door through which all the animals from a previous story (one of the participant's favourite) can go through. This reinforced our discussion on animals' homes from Social Studies and Vocabulary. Another of the children's favourite books was a good link to consolidate the teaching of colours in Mathematics, Science and Art. (*September 15, 2005)

The Story of Ferdinand (Leaf, 1936) was another example of integration of subjects. Despite being an opportunity to sharpen listening and comprehension skills, we were also able to review Vocabulary (the new word of that day was *happy*), Phonics (initial sound of Bb and Hh), and the words *big* and *small* as discussed in Mathematics and Vocabulary.

When conversing, children often used words demonstrating comprehension as in the following entry:

> *One child said that another caught a spider in the zoo (referring to the school yard).* (September 22, 2005)

This occurred a few days after we had discussed a story in which a zoo was described as a place animals live.

This prompted me to think about the way teaching across subject areas resembled a collage. A discussion with my advisor led me to investigate more the use of metaphors, especially in education. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another" (p.5). Choosing collage, an artistic reference, to describe the integration of content on the curriculum, demonstrated my belief that teaching using integration is a creative task varying depending on the mood of the artists that include the teacher and students in a particular environment. One of my research colleagues remarked that the idea of *collage* helped her see the artistic nature of teaching. She continued to say that *collage* draws attention to the whole curriculum and not just the various parts. As an elementary science major, she drew an analogy to the ecosystem.

A collage is not a cookie-cutter creation. This reflects my belief that there is not just one way to integrate curriculum in early childhood classrooms. Integration will not look the same to all teachers and students in all classrooms. Different collages of subject matter integration can be effective as they help children make connections. At the same time, I am well aware of the limitations of these metaphors. As Goldstein (2005) noted, "even the most powerful metaphor offers only partial connection" (p. 16). Nevertheless, reflecting on the ideas of collage helped me to gain a much deeper understanding of the children's and my own experience in kindergarten.

Creating a Collage in Our Classroom

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, a collage is "a picture made by fixing small objects to a surface." Synonyms include clutter and disorder. Traditionally at Brades Primary School, the days' activities are laid out in a neat and orderly manner on the timetable. Integrating subjects will not be always neat and tidy. Ultimately, there is a need to integrate subject content. According to Gura (1996), "when we plan for learning in terms of separate dimensions of the whole, we undermine the strength of the whole" (Gura, 1996, p. 15). Ashton-Warner (1963) cited Beeby, who once said, that "life, as a whole, is too complicated to teach to children. The minute it is cut up, they can understand it, but you are liable to kill it in cutting it up" (p.51). In addition to providing connections across subject content and a bridge between old and new knowledge, it allows for deeper understanding and more creativity from both teacher and students. At the same time, a collage is not a random assortment of objects, or in the case of curriculum, of ideas, concepts, or information. There is a plan to its assembly.

The idea to integrate subjects in Montserrat schools is not novel, at least according to local education documents. These changes are reflected on timetables and report cards (Appendices H-K). Close examination revealed that Phonics, Vocabulary, Comprehension, Composition, Grammar, Reading, and Spelling were combined into Language Arts. Health Science and Natural Science are now known simply as General Science. Influenced by the United Kingdom National Literacy Strategy, the various Language Arts components of the curriculum have now been amalgamated under a

Literacy Hour as indicated on the timetable (see Appendix I). In practice though, some teachers continue to list the various components of Language Arts on the new report cards introduced during the 2002-2003 school year. This was partly a response to parents who wanted to know how well their children did in each specific area. So even in instances where the subjects were combined for instruction according to the curriculum, it is apparent that some practices, more particularly the assessment, remained unchanged.

The examples below illustrate how subject integration looked in my classroom. One afternoon the other Kindergarten teacher was absent from school, attending a funeral, and I was in charge of both classes. There were 30 children in total in the Art lesson. I was assisted by a former student, 12-years-of-age, who attended the Montserrat Secondary School. We wrote each child's name on a sheet of 8" x 11" paper with crayon after which they were allowed to add their own decoration also with crayon. They were called one by one to the painting stations to paint over their crayon creations with blue paint.

Although the bell rang to indicate that it was recess, the children opted to stay and wait their turn to paint. I overheard the following discussion between two Grade One visitors to the classroom:

Boy 1: Kindergarten having so much fun.

Boy 2: Fu true (that's true: approving the statement)

Teacher-Researcher: Grade One can be fun too.

Boy 1: No, all we do is work.

Teacher-Researcher: We work too.

Boy 1: All we do is write, write, write (The only thing we do is write).

Integrating art when teaching other subjects –unusual in a Montserrat kindergarten – can enhance students' motivation. Later that day another teacher visited and said she had not done any art so far in the term. I used the opportunity to explain how I included art in our Math/Phonics lesson the previous day. In order to introduce the concept of three and reinforce the sound letter 'Bb' makes, children were given sets of buttons with various sizes, colours and styles. They were asked to make a set of three. Some had to request more buttons. This was a follow up to a lesson colouring a worksheet with pictures all beginning with the /b/ sound. We discussed the use of buttons and the colours and sizes of the buttons. We followed up by making brooches (Figure 22) that required the children to listen to and follow instructions. Children were also provided with opportunities to develop their fine motor skills in preparation for writing. Discriminating the initial sound of the word *button* is preparation for reading and spelling. While these examples would indicate a cautious or tentative approach to integration in less restrictive school cultures, in Montserrat they were non-traditional.

One Friday afternoon I invited the other Kindergarten class to join us to make bookmarks. I used the opportunity to explain their use (to mark a page when Reading) when one child asked what we were making. Children were also learning Language Arts as they listened in order to follow instructions (Comprehension). New words (Vocabulary) were introduced such as *bookmark* and we were able to reinforce basic parts of books (Reading).

A further example of integration was our study of the book *Cars and trucks and things that go* by Richard Scarry (1998) in which we combined Art, Science, Comprehension, Reading, Phonics, Writing and Social Studies. Energy makes things go

(Science). Living things also need energy and get their energy from food (animals) and sunlight, water, and oxygen in the air (plants). Locally used methods of transportation, types of energy needed and names and locations of gas stations on the island were all discussed and shared (Social Studies). Children randomly repeated words they heard during the story that began with sounds they already knew and identified the letters making the sounds (Phonics, Vocabulary, and Comprehension). Children were able to recall and relate to previous information that explained how plants make their own food using sunlight, water and air. They made their own connections across subjects. In the end we were able to compose and agree on a sentence (composition) and draw a picture (Art) to summarize. In a follow up activity one child chose to make a letter "g" in plasticine representing the beginning sound for "gas" and "go" (see figure 18). For Writing/Penmanship we wrote "Energy makes things go" in our exercise books that day.

Figure 18. *Student reviewing her phonics using plasticine*

Literature proved to be a rich tool for integration. Another example involved the story *Dumpy – A Bonnie Book* by Lucy MacDonald (1947). It was originally chosen to talk about homes of animals including types, names and reasons for homes as expected under the subject areas, Vocabulary and Science. However we also discussed Science, such as sounds animals make and the reasons for making sounds, along with the use of some plants as shelter. We included learning outcomes within Vocabulary and Grammar such as opposites: fast and slow; heavy and light. In Social Studies we spoke of workers who make clothing: the seamstress (female) and tailor (male). This resembled Gura's (1996) mix and match approach to integration.

On more than one occasion I was amazed by the unexpected connections children made during discussions, creating links with previous stories and lessons. As a result I was afforded opportunities to strike "a balance between guiding the children's learning and following their lead" (Chang, 2005, p. 221) as the following entry describes:

> *Parique came during a free play period to inform me of the names of his group who helped him to build a block container ship that brings cars and tractors.*
> (January 16, 2006)

Based on this conversation I was able to introduce the concept of export and import. Living on an island with limited resources we have to rely on workers in other countries to supply many of our needs. During our discussion children identified items we import including their books, pencils, and chalk, shoes, clothing and building materials, all of which were not made locally. Guava cheese, cassava bread, sugar cakes, mangoes and local craft were items identified as exports, mainly to relatives overseas. Currently

Montserrat's' only commercial export is volcanic material needed by some neighbouring islands for construction.

Instead of "keeping different areas of life separate: home from workplace, Sundays from weekdays and work from play" (Gopnik, 1999, p. 203), I often tried to use or incorporate children's experience at home and in the community. Like Portelli and Vibert (2001) emphasized, I tried to create "a curriculum of life that is grounded in the immediate daily world of students as well as in the larger social, political contexts of their lives" (p. 63). As a result I did not introduce the use of one specific book or use an abundance of standard passages for instruction. Our reading activities were overwhelmingly based on the stories we have read, our news items, our individual and group compositions/creations and happenings in and around our class, school, island and world. In addition I used a variety of books, mixing and matching to suit changing needs.

Integrating the curriculum encouraged different relationships. Information was not transmitted solely from teacher to students: interactivity between and among students and even with visitors was important. Interactivity, as defined by Markett, Arnedillo Sanchez, Weber and Tangney (2006), is "a complete message loop originating from and concluding with the student" (p. 281). Students are thus co-directors of any effective curriculum integration process. It must begin with their curiosity and end with more clarity. Project work and the Reggio Emilio approach are examples of this. Interactivity "is reported to promote a more active learning environment, facilitate the building of learning communities, provide greater feedback for lecturers (teachers), and help student motivation" (p. 280).

The students were thus empowered, uninhibited and willing to share what they knew with whoever would listen. They were observed to be active members of their learning community as noted by the following excerpts from the visitors' reflections of two local education officials, the Head Teacher, and a math consultant from the United Kingdom

> The objectives of the lesson were accomplished. Every child responded to the probing of the teacher with hands excitedly raised; some shouted the answers at times when they felt it was necessary (an indication of active and purposeful listening), completed their writing in their books and attempted the worksheet activity. (Education Official, November 18, 2005)
>
> They were highly engaged. This was supported by their ability to share with the Officials the concepts they have learned. The fact that high percentages of students provided feedback was also another good indicator. (Head Teacher, February, 2006)
>
> Yes, the students were actively involved in the lesson. I came to the above conclusion because at the point of the visit all students were doing individual work except one who apparently had a reasonable excuse. As the visit was extended, all students answered the questions asked about the story, very well and it was clear that they had detailed memory of the story. (Education Official, February, 2006)
>
> The children clearly enjoyed what they were learning. (Math Consultant, February 16, 2006)

It seems fair to conclude that integrating subjects especially when the lesson is flexible enough to allow for student input enhances learning and the enjoyment of learning. This was true in terms of students' intellectual achievement as indicated on an achievement test and in relation to their enjoyment and active participation during the learning experience.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING TOGETHER

This chapter explores teaching and learning using a child-focused approach in relation to three overarching themes: celebrating learning; collaborating, and co-controlling. These themes were identified from the data over the course of the first term in the kindergarten. I began labeling data early in the school year. In the process several potential themes emerged including: children's desire to share their achievements with other adults in addition to me (other teachers, Head Teacher, Education Officials, parents, visitors to the class); children's need to work and play with others; their desire to be in control (share authority, decision making, have a say in what happens in the classroom, wanting to do things traditionally done only by teacher); and their desire to belong, to feel safe. In this chapter, each theme will be briefly introduced, and then further discussed in its relation to the others.

I began printing photos and pages from children's books and filing them according to the rough category that I thought they best represented. But by October, this soon proved impractical since most of the data I was gathering was through oral and visual media, my observations and journal/log entries. It then occurred to me that since the images were digital, they could be stored digitally. The children were not drawing and scribbling as much as I had anticipated. As a result I began writing categories next to the entries in the log itself. Consequently, as I wrote weekly reports, I started an electronic database. I opened a document for each theme and started cutting and pasting from the weekly reports. Some entries were pasted into more than one document. Eventually I amalgamated phrases and searched for words to better convey the meanings to label each document. The final step at this coding stage was an examination of photos and samples of children's work reflecting themes.

Celebrating Learning: Sharing Accomplishments

Influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach, I became aware very early of the children's efforts to celebrate their ongoing achievements immediately rather than according to my schedule. To the children, celebration often meant showing their work to others. Once during the construction of brooches, I denied the children's request to invite a visitor until the task was accomplished, to the dismay of the students. On another occasion I was more attuned and immediately responded as indicated by the following journal entry.

> *We were practicing for sports so very little formal and organized work is taking place. Shaimar has just begun to show signs of improvement in his fine motor skills development and wants to write and write every opportunity he gets. During break time he asked "Teacher can I take my book to show my friend?" I said yes and he excitedly got his book and ran to the Nursery School next door to show his eight year old friend who attends another Primary School but was visiting her mother*. (Tuesday March 7, 2006)

Prior to this I would have thought that he had nothing worthy of sharing. But I now interpreted this as his knowing he was making progress and wanting to celebrate this with a friend. As similar examples accumulated, *Celebrating* was a clear theme.

Collaborating: Learning with Friends

The second broad theme was related to the children's desire to play, help, and work with one another. They appeared to want to be liked and therefore I thought that their main objective for school was developing friendships. Later, seeing their enthusiasm and willingness to help one another achieve mastery of new concepts and knowledge, I revised this label to one of collaborating. They did not just want to socialize but also to work with one another to accomplish tasks. According to Paley (1990), it is natural for children and teachers to want to be liked by the other members in a class community even if it means working on a task together and helping each other to achieve.

> Much of what I do that is good in the classroom is motivated I am sure, by my desire to be liked by the children and by my assistants. I do not wish to deny this fact, because it exerts a strong pull among us all. Unless we want to be liked by others, the classroom culture does not yield its magic. (p. 121)

While reviewing my research journal, I realized that their constant pleas for play partners were all recorded within the first month of the school year while we were bonding and building our class learning community. I concluded that it is partly because of my need to be liked by my students that I seek to make them the focus of the activities I planned. People who like each other work well with each other. Thus the evolution of the *Collaborating* theme: collaboration not only among students but with the teacher.

Co-controlling: We Are All Teachers and Learners

> *Early one morning before school began Y'lisia said: "Teacher I am going to be nice today because I want to (help you to) teach".* (Thursday September 8, 2005)

I asked children to help me teach the new student Brondon what we've learned about our island and the weather and they were all enthusiastic and offered lots of information. (Monday September 19, 2005)

*Integration initiated by children as they continuously linked previous stories to current stories and previous lessons. (*Thursday September 22, 2005)

These journal entries were some of the initial evidence of children wanting to have some influence over their learning in the classroom. Following is another entry which I had to get out of bed to record at 9:47 P.M., a remarkable occurrence considering that my usual bedtime was 8:00 P.M.

Earlier today while sticking up children's Social Studies work Jhenece asked to put her work on the classroom wall by herself and I got the camera and took a photo. [This was written in black ink. My reflection written in red ink follows]

Why is this important to me? Is it an indication that students want ownership of what's displayed in their classroom? (Thursday October 4, 2005)

Figure 19. *Student mounting her work on the classroom wall*

Following this late night awareness/epiphany I began paying closer attention to my students' request to do things in the classroom that I would normally do by myself. While marking children's work one day, Firen asked to choose and place her sticker in her book herself. I obliged and she was so excited she showed a few others explaining that she had done so herself. Needless to say, the same request was also made by others and this was a common occurrence from that point. It allowed me to spend more time individually with other children. On another occasion while preparing for an Art/Craft lesson I was cutting paper plates in half when Y'lisia returned early from recess to assist. She felt so proud when I gave her the pieces that she had cut herself to work with later. Unlike me, she was not troubled that the plate was not cut into two perfect halves. This helped me understand that some children are so keen to help create materials they will even miss recess.

Figure 20. *Student voluntarily working on craft project with the teacher during break time*

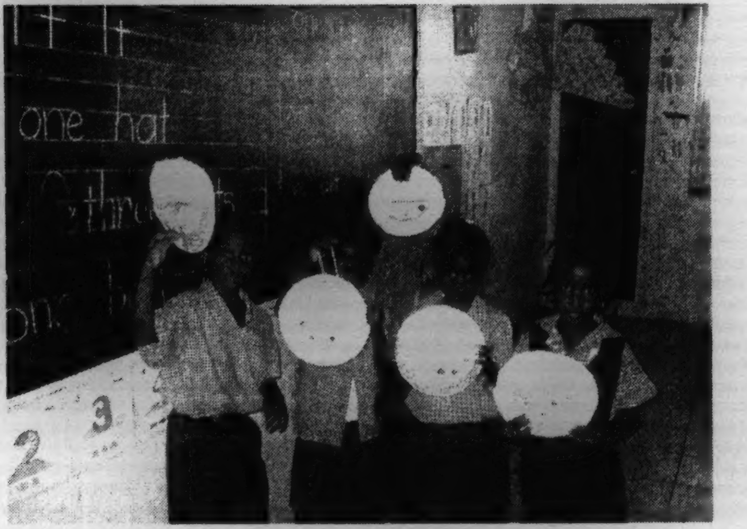

Figure 21. *Her project looked similar to these despite not being in "perfect" halves*

Based on these examples and in relation to other stories regarding the sharing of authority in primary grade classrooms (Oyler, 1996; Paley 1990 & Paley, 1997), I thought of children's need to be independent, and to have a certain amount of power and control. It seems then that understanding more about sharing authority was important. My search for a way to express this lead me to the term, *co-controlling*.

Thinking Within and Across Themes

Separating the themes was more difficult than I anticipated. Some data related to more than one category, and I began to realize that the themes were complementary and interrelated, representing another version of collage. For example, co-control and collaboration were joined in the following example from a class meeting at the start of the first term. Motivated by Oyler (1996a), I entered the classroom expecting to share the power in the classroom with my students. Through discussion we agreed on acceptable behaviours from a teacher's point of view. We engaged in discussions that began: "If I was the teacher I would…" and "If I was the Head teacher, I would…" Discussing our expectations for the year helped set the stage for our relationship. I did not begin by dictating rules; we discussed behaviours and their consequences as they occurred. The only item I stated without discussing was "always try, never say I can't" which was associated with a motto I adopted years ago and posted over the large chalkboard that was still there after two years: *I can if I try.*

The children were also told that my job was to help them, so they must ask for help from me or others instead of saying they can't. From that point other class rules evolved. As a group we would come up with a solution, starting with the question of what they would do if they were the teacher. We used discussions as a means to engage in power sharing, in the spirit of Wilford's (2006) idea that "researchers understand collaboration to include cooperation but also to mean building knowledge through conversation" (p. 15).

Gartrell (2000) believed that "when children come to feel a sense of community in the encouraging classroom, their behaviours become more spontaneous and sociable" (p. 22). The following journal entry is an example of how power sharing, co-control, and collaboration during decision making promoted a spontaneous sociable reaction within what became a loving community.

> *In the afternoon the children were colouring photos/drawings to reinforce the /k/ sound made by the letter Kk. Jemanie came to me and said "Teacher, I want music." A mini oral vote showed that the majority of the class also wanted to listen to music while they coloured.* (January 11, 2006)

I put a CD on the player and the children resumed their colouring, but a few minutes later Jemanie stopped colouring and started to dance. I was surprised when the others continued their work while singing along to the recorded music. Our class' efforts at co-controlling involved collaboration and communication among the children and me. Collaboration eventually extended to include parents, guardians, other teachers, students from other classes and members of the community.

All three themes came together as children expressed a strong interest to celebrate their learning with others. Greenberg (2004) suggested children learn best "when all the significant adults in their lives consciously and conscientiously pull in the same direction" (p. 14). This provoked my thinking regarding parent's involvement in the school. At a staff meeting in October, I listened as my colleagues observed that parents were not responding to invitations to attend PTA meetings, and attendance was usually poor. There was the common statement that the parents of children we most wanted to attend would not come. Even teachers who tried individual meetings during previous school years expressed this concern. We began toying with the idea of having class group meetings for Grades K, 1 and 2, Grades 3 and 4, and Grades 5 and 6.

As I reflected later in the day I wondered what motivated the quite frequent spontaneous visits by parents to my classroom, but not on formal occasions such as Open Day, PTA or for collecting of report cards. I was concerned the visits may eventually stop instead of increase and began thinking of ways to maintain the momentum throughout the year. It was then I realized that the parents were responding not solely to my invitation but their children's invitation. It was a collaborative effort. The children were individually inviting their parents to come to school. All of the parents who had visited so far were invited by the children to see their work that was displayed in the classroom, for example, to view the brooches made during an integrated lesson in September. Before we were even finished, one student asked to go and show his aunt (a teacher on the compound). I told him to wait until we were finished.

Instead of asking the children to take their creations home that afternoon we mounted them and displayed them in the classroom (Figure 22). My initial reason for doing this was to preserve them as data. However, this ignited the initial wave of adult visits to the classroom. I interpreted the parents' visits as acts of celebrating the children's success before the work was taken home.

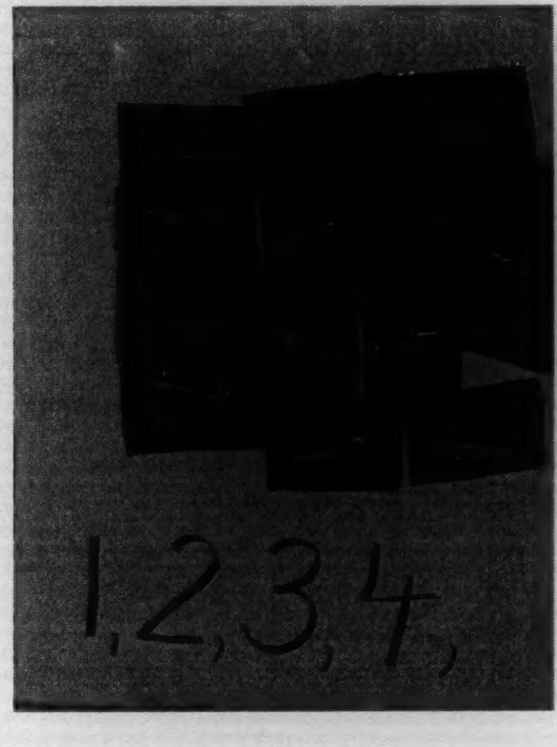

Figure 22. *The children's brooches mounted on the wall in the classroom*

Figure 23. *Fire fighter father viewing his son's brooch*

The visits were indications that children and parents were talking about their schoolwork at home. This had an impact at school as the children used the opportunity to explain and demonstrate other things in the classroom. It also gave me the chance to build my relationship with parents. Very often when parents come to PTA we would meet in the hall and children would not be present. During these visits initiated by the children, it was evident that the children used their influence to invite their parents which facilitated collaboration and communication between the significant adults (teacher and parents) in their lives. Cuffaro's (1995) description of early childhood classrooms based on Dewey's philosophy seemed to reflect our classroom experience, where "the teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator and becomes the leader of group activities" (p. 59). I was no longer 'queen of my palace', and I did not regret the loss of this position. I acted as a supporting partner during these visits/tours when needed. Authority and control were shared and became part of an overall socializing process (Cuffaro, 1995).

Children seemed to know when they were doing well and they liked to share these moments. On occasions when I praised a child and they were proud of themselves too, they would request permission to take their work out of the classroom to another teacher or the Head Teacher. In retrospect, I have denied many of these requests citing the busyness of teachers and asking the children to wait until break or lunchtime. Yet, whenever I had a negative complaint I would send them immediately without considering that the Head Teacher might be busy. The visits to the classroom did not stop though the frequency eventually slowed. Parents continued to visit from time to time at the request of their children to view or take part in different activities at school and in the classroom.

There were several general Parent Teachers Association (PTA) meetings during the first term and the various special occasions such as St Valentine's, St Patrick's week, and Commonwealth Day in addition to preparations for Sports presented scheduling problems. As a result our first formal Kindergarten-only PTA meeting was held during February in the second term. Together with my Kindergarten colleague we drafted invitations for the children to take home for their parents. I also solicited the children's views: "What do you want me to tell your parents at the meeting?" They shouted with excitement, and most individually approached my table and dictated their messages to me. I delivered all the messages, in one instance by phone call (to the parents who were unable to attend) the next morning before I went to school. Following are some of their messages.

Brondon: That I learn my lesson properly today. (He was able to master the combining of two sets on his own.)

Y'lene: That I jus behave myself. (I usually behave myself.)

Rhadije: I not behaving. (I am not behaving.)

Y'lisia: I being nice to teacher. I jus kiss teacher. I jus first, I play and on and on…(I am usually kind to teacher. I usually kiss teacher. I came first, referring to completing an assignment before the others. I play – here the others began crying out for her to stop as they too wanted their turn.)

Laurisha: I behaving.

Tiano: That I help you clean up the class.

Firen: That I behaving.

Wendol: That I get third. (Third person to complete an activity correctly that day.)

Jhenece: That I getting all right in school. (I got everything correct.)

Parique: That I behave rude. (I am not behaving well.)

Of the 14 children in the study at the time, 12 were represented at the class' PTA meeting by a parent. Both of Jhenece's parents came. Unavoidable circumstances prevented the parents of Parique (official national function) and the grandmother of Wendol (work schedule) from attending. I am inclined to think that the students played an instrumental role in influencing their parents'/guardians' decision to attend and/or contact me explaining their absence and requesting an update. This was different from anything I had experienced before. Parique's mother said that he kept asking her if she wasn't getting ready for the meeting and was very disappointed when he realized that she was getting dressed to attend another event.

I believe it may be worthwhile to involve children and parents in planning these meetings in the future, thus sharing authority in conducting the business that occurs at school (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Oyler, 1996b; Paley, 1997). Parents can be invited to suggest topics for discussion at the meetings which may further increase their involvement. The Head Teacher usually chairs PTA meetings but meetings could be chaired or co-chaired by or with a parent. I believe we need to make PTA meetings more of a celebration of children's work than a listing of their shortcomings.

Safety and Comfort Matters

The kindergarten children were tested at the end of the second term along with rest of the school's population, and report cards were issued. The test atmosphere was more stressful than in December. I was newly appointed Education Officer with responsibility for Early Childhood Education, and a trainee teacher was assigned to our classroom. In addition the children were "schoolized" Chamoiseau (1997) and it was no longer as easy to help them relax about tests. They knew what tests meant, and were under some pressure from their parents' to outdo their classmates (Gross, 2006). The trainee teacher held traditional ideas, and she discouraged them from talking to each other and moving around the classroom. Collaboration and talking stopped and the usual comfortable mood of the class evaporated. Though they were ill at ease, their performance on the tests was not affected.

One of my aims as teacher was to create a safe and comfortable environment at all times in the classroom. It would be worth investigating further the effects of allowing interaction and communication among peers during testing, especially at the Kindergarten and Grade One levels. As early childhood teachers, I believe we must constantly remember that what we say, how we say it including the accompanying body language and facial expression influence the mood we create in our classrooms (James-Reid, 2003).

"The greater the time students work together and the greater the responsibilities student take for their work, the greater the learning" (Wong & Wong, 2001, p. 261). The children could invite visitors to the classroom whenever they desired. This motivated them to work diligently even if it sometimes meant seeking advice and accepting unsolicited assistance from others in order to have something to share and celebrate. For example, Shaimar who refused to collaborate and therefore was not assisted while doing the test exercise in December was now more open to assistance. During the first term he made few contributions to discussions except when asked and it was hard to know what he understood. However, by January, the start of the second term, just before he turned five, he appeared more comfortable in the class and started taking ownership for his learning. He participated more willingly in group activities and accepted help from peers. At times he asked for help. He appeared to feel more confident and often scouted out opportunities to celebrate his achievements by displaying it to others. This culminated with his invitation to his mother to visit us in the classroom. He had a need to share and celebrate his progress (Murgatroyd, 2006) with the important people in his life.

"Learning is an individual activity but not a solitary one. It is more effective when it takes place within a supportive community of learners" (Wong & Wong, 2001, p. 261). This support was evident when a new student joined the class in the second term (she was not a participant in the study),

> *Firen helped the new girl do all of her work by actually writing and drawing for her. She also accompanied her to my desk in order to prompt her when I questioned."* (February 9, 2006)

As established earlier, according to the Reggio Emilia approach, learning is based on relationships. Collaboration and communication are essential skills when relationships are at the core of a teacher's role (Fraser, 2005). The children demonstrated they were capable of contributing to the communication necessary to facilitate learning.

Establishing a level of comfort required sharing the responsibility for collaboration and communication. This signaled shared ownership of the classroom space. We became co-controllers in this kindergarten classroom. It was not just Teacher Burns' classroom, but our classroom. Children took a personal interest in retrieving the keys in the morning to open the door. It became a competition to see who got the key. They seemed to relish the idea of instructing older children to protect our space or leave. Within these walls they were also leaders. Jerome Bruner stated this succinctly:

> How best to conceive of a subcommunity that specializes in learning among its members? One obvious answer would be that it is a place where, among other things, learners help each other learn, each according to her own abilities. And this, of course, need not exclude the presence of somebody serving in the role of the teacher. It simply implies that the teacher does not play that role as a monopoly, that learners "scaffold" for each other as well. (1996, 21)

Some may feel co-controlling and collaborating detracts from the teacher's role. However, it appeared to enhance children's learning. From my experience, collaboration contributed to a richer experience for us all. There was a more varied perspective and I also had the opportunity to better cater to the interests and needs of the group as a whole as well as to individual students. As a group we were able to have more individual and personal exchanges with each other at various times. Research has shown that individualized instruction especially at the early childhood and primary grade levels is crucial to later learning which has benefits to society in the long term (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Gross, 2006; Oberheumer, 2005; Weikart,1989).

Teachers and parents whose ideas are aligned with a behavourist view of teaching and child rearing may argue that giving young children even a little degree of power and choice in the classroom may be chaotic and counterproductive. To the contrary, in addition to achieving the desired academic outcomes it is more developmentally appropriate because it allows young children to be more actively involved in the learning process. It can be argued that there are countless other benefits to be derived from power sharing with young children. The Caribbean Community, CARICOM, which came into effect August 1, 1973, is a political grouping of English speaking Caribbean countries. One of its aims is to improve the standard of living and work by producing a more creative and problem solving citizen. This gives a mandate to schools to focus on much more than academics. It would appear that exposing young children to opportunities to practice democratic principles of having rights and responsibilities, voicing opinions, making decisions and negotiating can help achieve this goal. It will do this by producing critical and reflective thinkers capable of getting along with others in the various groupings they may be a part of: families, governments, work establishments, sports teams, and community groups. Genuine participation in collaborative, co-controlled communities requires continuous negotiation and promotes the development of effective communication skills.

The children in this classroom were not afraid to express their opinions and dislikes for some of my actions especially when it directly affected the learning environment. Wilford (2006) referred to this confrontation as a necessary component of collaboration. I recall after the Christmas break we were involved in a discussion in which I was trying to determine if the children missed school and if so, what they missed most while on holiday. I anticipated hearing about missing playing with their friends and perhaps not being able to colour, write, read, take part in Sports, listen to stories or sing. I was surprised when one student declared that he was not happy to be back at school. When I probed I became even more perplexed when Brondon mentioned that he did not like the colour of the bulletin board and that he preferred the black one. He was referring to the display from November depicting the anniversary of Montserrat's discovery by Christopher Columbus. He did not even recall that the display was different in December. This led me to explain that I was in the midst of preparing a new display. I thought that changing the boards frequently was more appealing for them. From that time I would discuss before hand that I was about to change the board's display and solicit volunteers to dismantle and put up the new one.

Oops: Dictatorial or Democratic Teacher?

Being a plant lover, I brought plants to the classroom. In Science we learned about the various uses of plants and various ways to co-exist with nature. Although the plants were constantly watered they were also constantly bumped into and sometimes uprooted from the pots when they were knocked over. During discussions children from other classes were blamed for the plants' mistreatment. On two occasions I replaced damaged plants with new ones. However, the old teacher in charge, dictator, 'queen,' resurfaced and when I felt they were knocked over by the children one too many times, I took them home and did not bring replacements. After the plants were gone for about three weeks during one of our class discussions, one student Y'lene inquired, "Where are the plants?" I then explained that the plants were not treated well last term so I took them home. We were able to talk about good and bad ways of treating plants, especially indoor plants and the necessary measures we can employ to ensure the plants were able to grow properly. The children promised to water, clear the dead leaves, dig the soil and avoid knocking over the pots if I brought in new potted plants. We also got an empty bottle to display the cut flowers that various children brought to school from time to time. I kept my promise although I only returned one potted plant to the classroom at first. The children kept their promise and on some days the plants got too much water and too much pruning. Nevertheless, the plants survived until the end of the school year and received many rave reviews from visitors. I had erroneously concluded on my own that either the children did not want the plants in the classroom or they were not capable of caring for plants but my assumptions proved wrong in the end.

The children were able to direct me on many occasions to topics that not only interested them but proved excellent springboards for introducing various concepts in integrated ways. As a result it was easier to solicit and maintain their interest and active participation. The children often selected stories for our story time, resources for class use and suggested resource persons to assist with class activities and destinations to visit. They were responsible as a group for inviting and explaining about the class' activities to the majority of visitors to our classroom. Because they had some degree of power, it seemed easy for them to assume a variety of roles during collaboration, scaffolding and peer tutoring. No one student or students stood out as the main peer tutor.

The opportunity for them to co-control their learning environment encouraged them to communicate within a variety of settings (various group sizes and compositions with and without the teacher) collaboratively which led to numerous opportunities to celebrate their various accomplishments. In order to become a member or leader of an organization one needs to be able to work collaboratively and this will require effective communication skills. Throughout this experience the children's language, especially their vocabulary became impressively more developed. It is probable that because these kindergarteners were able to influence aspects of their learning, they were inclined to share with and assist others (collaborate) through various modes of communication.

The first formal teachers that children encounter can have a huge impact on influencing children's approach to learning and school. It is imperative that we try to make learning during the early years an impetus for lifelong learning. The opposite occurs for some students, like Chamoiseau's (1997) older siblings who as soon as they returned home from school every afternoon, "made themselves comfortable, as though they'd just reached port in a storm"(p. 15). School for them was like fighting a war, enduring a hurricane. Sharing control within the kindergarten classroom may help promote, enhance, ignite and maintain the desire for continuous learning.

School often physically separates the learner from the familiar – people, culture and environment. It is part of my educational philosophy that schools should welcome their learners and make them feel it is a home away from home. This requires learning to be contextualized in a different manner. Learning can be likened to a homecoming where the strange becomes familiar and eventually turns into a habitation of mind and heart. Ownership or part ownership of the learning activities will boost the children's sense of in the classroom community, "one that enhances the development of children, teachers, families and the community in which they live" (New, 2002, p. 259).

Flexibility Matters

Flexibility is essential in a child-focused learning environment. During a visit by an Education Official I had to change from my plan to read a story when the majority of the children wanted to write. The visitor was disappointed as she wanted to observe my approach to the United Kingdom's National Literacy Strategy. At first, I felt a bit out of control because the children appeared to be undermining my power and authority in the classroom in front of my supervisor. However, after composing myself, I introduced a Phonics/Art/Vocabulary/Writing lesson. I was surprised by the extent of the children's participation in the activities. They demonstrated their comprehension of the new concept being taught (the /h/ sound) and made connections and extensions based on previous knowledge, experience and skills. Although we had only covered initial consonant sounds (/b/, /c/, /d/, /f/ and /g/) some children were able to assist their peers by identifying incorrect words and supplying the correct initial sounds (/p/ for pony and /w/ for watch).

My journal excerpt for that morning follows:

After the children from the other Grade K left, the Education Official said she was going to spend some of the morning with us. I was prepared to begin with a story but the children expressed a desire to write instead. A few already had their books on their desks and some had actually begun writing the date.

Following their lead, I decided to proceed with writing the name of the day, month and their names. After individually checking each child's work and assisting with letter formation, they all seemed happy and ready to do oral work. We began by reviewing the /h/ sound made by the letter Hh. Children offered different words beginning with /h/. We also used the opportunity to discuss new and unfamiliar words.

Each child was given a worksheet depicting a Farm Scene and together we identified items in the picture beginning with the /h/sound. The Education Official also took part by dramatizing her clue to help the children identify one of the items "a handkerchief".

We were able to discuss products of a farm both plants and animals, and the names of various workers needed on a farm. We were also able to talk about the kinds of animals we can find on a farm. Colouring of the worksheets was my planned culminating activity but when the visitor decided on giving a prize to the best coloured picture in her opinion, even more excitement was added to the morning.

It was break time yet the children remained in class until they were able to stick up their artwork on the classroom walls themselves. (November 17, 2005)

The children were demonstrating to the Education Official and me that they were competent, that they had "surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities, as co-constructor(s) of knowledge and identity in relationship with other children and adults" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 7). As part of the lesson they were encouraged to colour the worksheet that had farm scene pictures beginning with the /h/ sound. They were so pleased with their performance and their worksheets that they all wanted to mount the work on the classroom walls themselves. They were so interested in mounting their masterpieces that when the bell rang for break time it was ignored by most.

The Education Official initiated a contest which she judged and offered a prize for the best piece of work. Although the prize added an external motivation the children were already actively engaged, intrinsically motivated and enjoying what they were doing. This demonstrated a play activity because in addition there was no one correct way of colouring the worksheets. Interestingly, according to the Education Officials reflection, too much time was "wasted" by the children hanging their art work. However, we had established that the classroom space belonged to the children as well as me. Allowing the children to mount their work was an opportunity for them to be involved in the creative design of the classroom, thereby turning the walls "into a living laboratory of learning" (Cookson Jr., 2006, p. 15).

I have often tried to link children's current interests and everyday events in effect to create a "Curriculum of Life". I found myself keen to listen to and reflect on the children's perspectives of local events. Every year around November many local artists go to the local radio station and have a live interview with the Radio Announcer in order to introduce the community to their latest songs for the yearly calypso competition – a main attraction for the Festival Celebrations. Possibly because I was overwhelmed with data collection I first learned the names of many of the new singers and songs for this year's competition not from listening to the radio but from listening to my children during our daily discussions. From their enthusiasm I gained knowledge of the festival's most popular calypsonians and calypsos. During these instances children were practicing concepts taught in Language Arts such as listening, speaking, comprehension and vocabulary. In some instances we were able to learn about topics of interest from calypsos making social commentaries. Involving my students in these discussions raised their comfort level in the classroom and made them more motivated learners. I felt that I was achieving this after reading the following comments from some visitors' reflections that indicated there were strengths in the teaching methods.

> *The memorable aspect was the lively discussion the children had with the officials* (January 26, 2006).
>
> *The most memorable thing about my visit was the high level of participation by the pupils* (January 26, 2006).

Another indication that I was achieving some measure of co-control with my students was evident by this comment from one education official *"... some shouted answers when they could not control themselves, corrected their peers when they felt it was necessary (an indication of purposeful listening)*." It seems children were motivated, enjoying themselves, actively involved/engaged, were not coerced to participate and because they were able to assist in directing the flow and eventual outcome there was an element of fantasy outside the teacher's sole control. I was in effect helping the children to engage in playful learning.

Designing a "perfect" learning environment should "be a creative and community building opportunity" (Cookson Jr., 2006, p. 14). Students should be involved as this is another opportunity through which the teacher can share control of the learning environment with students. Allowing children to make their own decisions and voice their suggestions and objections at this early age is just (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). All children should be given opportunities to do so in a democratic world according to article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which reads:

> Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations Children's Fund, 2005)

In an "ideal learning community, work flows throughout the classroom, materials are ready and abundant, students feel safe and there is a logic to the classroom organization that enhances learning" (p. 14). In our classroom, the children appeared comfortable and safe and I tried to make resources available and accessible. However, I am not certain if the resources were truly accessible to the students or whether there were other materials the children could have used? Were there more suitable locations, from the children's perspectives, to place the available resources? Would more control in the classroom layout/design have made it safer in the eyes of the students thus contributing to more enhanced learning? How could I have consulted/involved the students more when classroom decisions were being made?

Research indicates collaboration in classrooms requires "reflection, persistence and flexibility" (Wilford, 2006, p. 16). It is also understood to include cooperation and dialogue (Wilford, 2006). In our classroom there was evidence of collaboration in most interactions. It was necessary to constantly amend plans according to children's interests and ongoing events. Constantly reviewing and making connections between new and existing knowledge was one of our favourite pastimes. This is in stark contrast to the

Montserratian schooling tradition, in which children are expected to work quietly and independently as much as possible.

In traditional classrooms interaction during class time is discouraged. It is normal for children to be scolded for talking or consulting with their peers. The majority of class time is spent on teacher-led activities. Children are sometimes given manipulative and problem solving activities, yet they are still expected to address only the teacher and only when asked. My teaching philosophy, which developed over the course of the research, holds that learning is derived from social experience (Brodova & Leong, 2007). Children saw this as well, as seen in their drawings that include groups of their classmates (Figure 24).

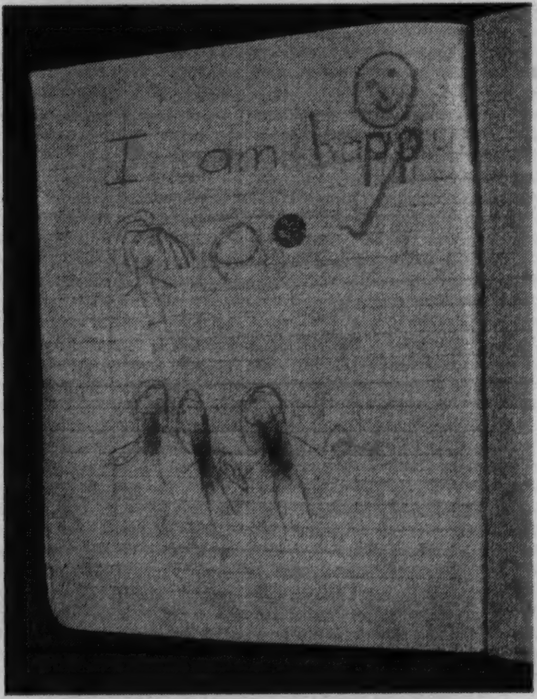

Figure 24. *Child's drawing showing that being with others evokes happiness*

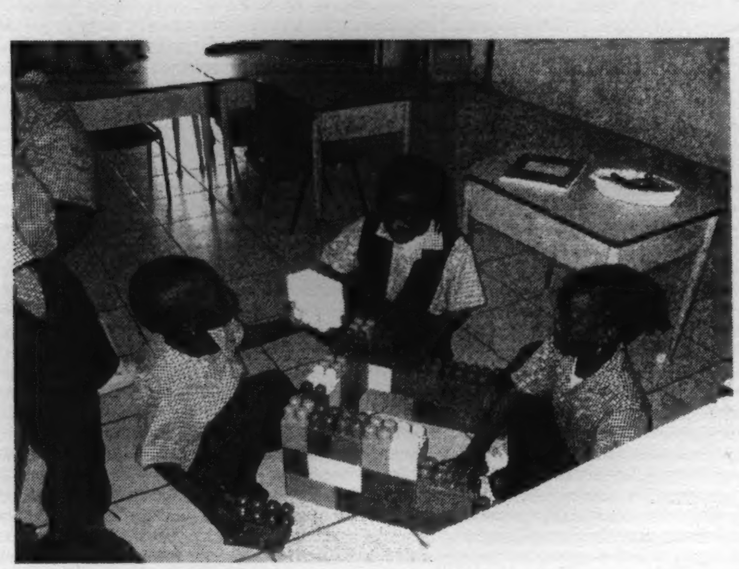

Figure 25. *Children collaborating during play. Play is a rare occurrence in local kindergarten classrooms*

During free play, as in Figure 25, children worked together creating whatever they imagined. On only a few occasions did they make a plan ahead of time. I often witnessed their negotiating skills as they decided what they were making in the process of its construction. They used rich vocabulary, for example, "put a small red one there," "is it my turn now?," "we need another big block," and "this blue one can't fit. It is too big." Listening, I could assess their comprehension of number concepts, size, colour, and language. Observing their play also helped me ascertain topics of interest for future planning.

Putting Me to the Test

Another memorable example of the children's collaboration occurred at the end of term tests before Christmas vacation. Children were expected to listen to the instructions and individually complete the tasks. These results would not be formally reported. I did not mention the word "test" to the children or offer the usual cautions that accompany test-taking such as: "no talking", "do your own work", or "keep your eyes on your own paper". After I distributed the 'test' to the children at their desks, I was surprised to see them get up to move around the classroom and form groups to complete the tasks. They repeated and explained the instructions to whoever seemed to be having difficulty. I was caught off guard and only managed to record parts of some conversations and discussions.

Figure 26. *One student sharing his friend's desk in order to get assistance during a test*

Teacher-Researcher: "Why are you sitting there, Brondon?"

Brondon:"Firen told me to."

Firen obviously realized that he needed help. He missed the first two weeks of school. At one point I saw her actually erasing something from his paper.

Teacher-Researcher: "Why are you doing that?"

Firen: It doesn't look good.

Another child was overheard asking/seeking approval: "Ain't mine look good?" (Does my work look good?)

Figure 27. *A first time kindergartner, assisting a repeater during testing*

As part of the test, the children were required to draw a shorter pencil than the one illustrated. Y'lene said to Y'lisia (a repeater): "That's an ice-cream not a pencil" (referring and pointing to the object that she drew on her paper (Figure 28).

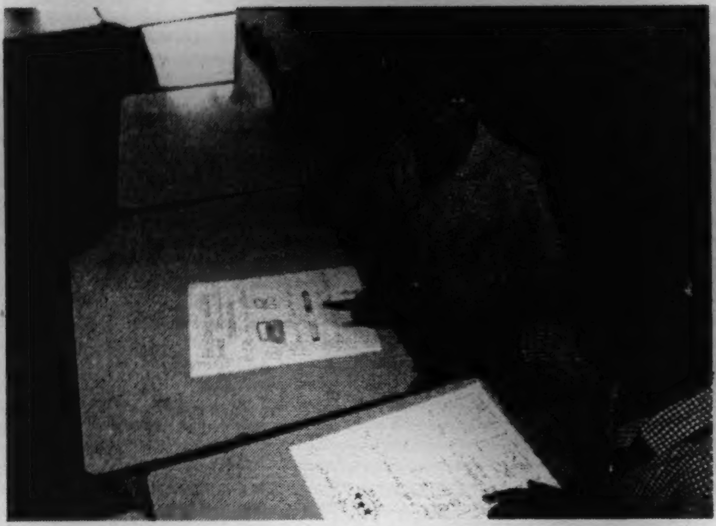

Figure 28. *One student pointing out the other's mistake during a test*

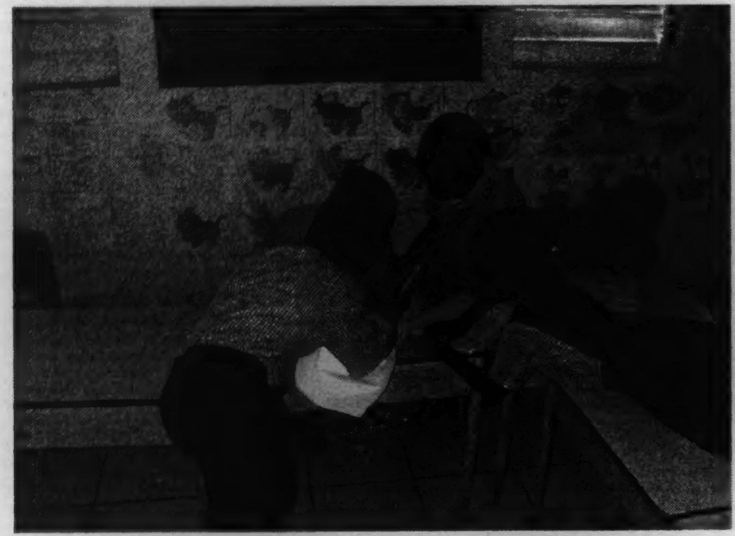

Figure 29. *Children assuming positions not normally encouraged in classrooms in order to assist a classmate during testing*

It was particularly interesting to hear so many conversations demonstrating comprehension of the assigned tasks during their inaugural foray at testing. These conversations would never occur during test taking. This is something I never paid attention to before. Despite my reservations about tests I had succumbed to the test culture and often demanded no interaction among the children during these times. As a result I had deprived my students the opportunity to display their group knowledge. I was also eliminating opportunities for myself, to correct misunderstandings immediately before the work was completed and turned in to be graded.

Parique: "Teacher, I don't want to have no tests.

Teacher: "Why?"

Parique: "Tests hard."

Yet interestingly, a few moments later after inspecting Y'lene's book (Figure 30) Parique exclaimed: "Y'lene circled the wrong one… she did more." This was in response to the instruction to circle the set with less.

Jemanie responded without being invited into the discussion.

Jemanie: "Less means the one with little."

Figure 30. *Student's work being checked only moments after she had corrected someone else's work*

I interpreted their behavior as indicating they wanted one another to succeed. Y'lene felt that Y'lisia may have misunderstood the instructions and drew it to her attention (Figure 29). Although Parique said tests were hard because he was unable to write properly, he did not hesitate to inform Y'lene (Figure 30) that she had done something wrong. Jemanie helped Parique explain to Y'lene by suggesting another word.

I learned a great deal from observing and listening to the children that day. The same child who offered assistance on one occasion was the recipient of assistance in the very next instant. The scaffolder became scaffoldee in an instant as circumstances shifted. If I had to assign the roles of peer tutors, I would have felt some students were incapable of offering assistance to particular students. However, in their eyes, the roles were not fixed. Children paid attention to one another's performance, caring that they succeeded.

Adult visitors were also involved in the classroom community (Figures 31 and 32). Through interactions and discussions with the visitors, the children gained perspectives and information not normally available. Children were also keen to share what they knew with the visitors. They were never inhibited and these occasions provided me with opportunities to assess the way they transferred learning in real life situations. Feedback from some of these visitors also seems to substantiate my observations.

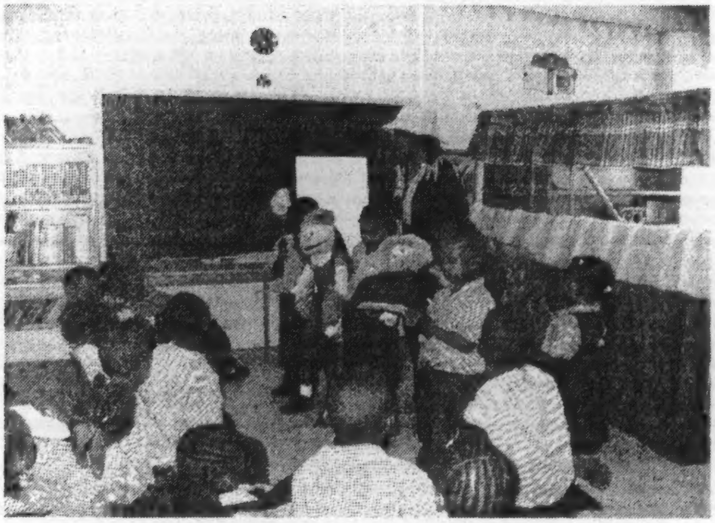

Figure 31. *Local media personality, on behalf of the Montserrat Tourist Board exposing the children to some of Montserrat's National symbols*

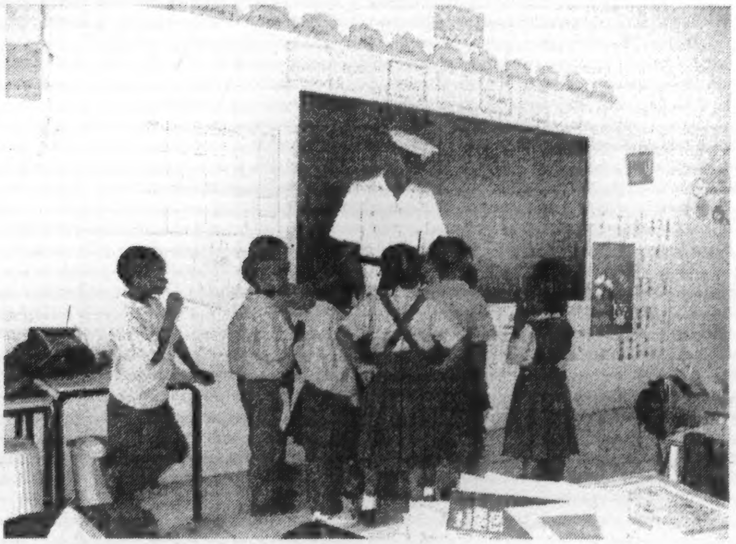

Figure 32. *Police Officer talking with Students and answering their questions about his role in the community*

Figure 33. *Collaboration among the Kindergarteners to demonstrate their knowledge of National symbols using puppetry*

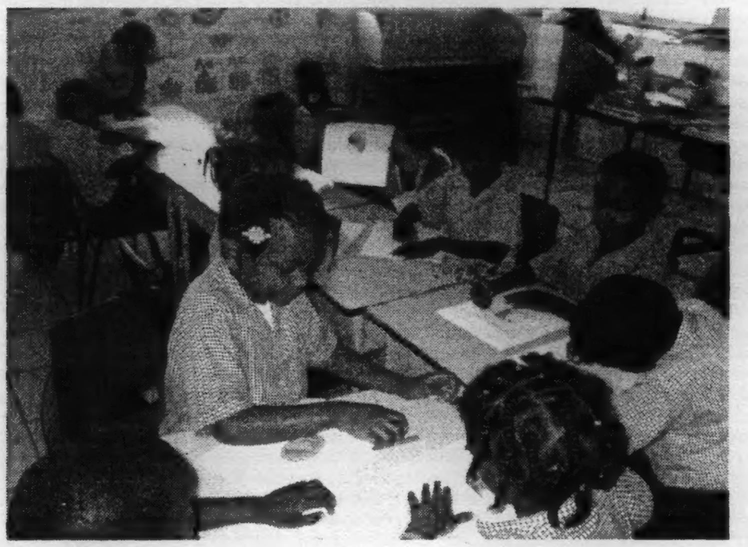

Figure 34. *Students collaborating with children from the other kindergarten class on an art project*

Effective Collaborators

Our classroom had evolved over the year into one of constant collaboration. When parents visited it was not unusual to have other children try to steal the limelight from the child of the visitor by giving hugs and engaging the adult in conversation. The children would also try to learn as much as possible about anyone who came to visit me at school. Even before Y'lisia ever met my son, she would tell me to tell him hello or send snacks or candy for him.

Confrontations and conflicts were a part of our collaboration. This is consistent with the idea associated with the Reggio Emilia approach that teachers are provocateurs. Conflict can result in rich learning. I used these occasions to explain that although the action hurts our feelings, we can negotiate and still be friends. If the children could not resolve their conflict by themselves I would arbitrate, trying to get them to apologize to each other, hug or shake hands. This met with resistance early in the academic-year as children would refuse to hug or shake hands and only murmur "I'm sorry", apparently to appease me. Eventually a few of the children worked harder to resolve their conflicts collaboratively, sometimes with a peer acting as arbitrator before bringing the matter to my attention.

Children's questions were also very enlightening and thought provoking. On one occasion I recall my co-worker, the other kindergarten teacher remarking that: "in our day we could have never asked Teacher Ann such a question." I secretly accepted the remarks as indication that the children had the confidence to realize that it was acceptable to let me know they are curious.

The formal timetable was not always appropriate because of the integrated activities in which we were engaged. Sports sessions, conducted by coaches operating out of the Chief Minister's Office, occurred on Wednesdays immediately after the lunch break. This was the only block of time over which we had no control. The ability to engage in activities when it suited us gave us the flexibility we needed. This flexibility enabled me to respond immediately or as soon as possible to children's interests, questions and suggestions. I believe this made them feel respected. As Fraser (2005) wrote, "when reciprocity is seen as the basis of the relationship between teachers and children, the relationship will be more respectful, more equal and more interactive" (p. 82).

Our activities were sometimes very spontaneous and interactive, as when the education official came to visit and was hoping to see a literacy lesson but instead she witnessed a different lesson entirely, that had been negotiated between the children and myself. To some, our classroom may have lacked order and discipline, was too chaotic, too busy and noisy. Yet according to the results of achievement tests (Appendix L) administered in March to both classes it appeared that academic aims were not compromised.

I did not initiate or lead all discussions. An example was after a long weekend in October. That Monday I had chosen a story and asked the children to gather on the rug for story time. While some followed my instruction, others remained at their desks with their books and pencils ready to write while others were just talking with each other. Eventually I rescheduled the story for another time and we began a discussion about what the children did over the weekend. A discussion during the visit of the Permanent

Secretary of Education, Director of Education and the Head Teacher was actually initiated by Y'lene who began by saying "we just made a puzzle …" and this sparked a conversation between the children and the officials. During national elections, the children constantly initiated discussions about the candidates. It is customary to say that a candidate is going to run if he/she is seeking election, and I learned they confused this expression with athletic races and the schools' sporting activities.

Pedagogical Documentation

Although pedagogical documentation was quite limited – displays lacked commentaries and process photographs – it was unique in a Montserratian context. Displays were mainly samples of children's work. On several occasions as a class and sometimes with the other kindergarten class, we reviewed our digital photos (those taken by the children and myself), either on my computer or using the television monitor in the school library. As a result, I received requests from parents for photos. This is one reason why at the reflection celebration, a slide show of photos from our classroom experience was presented. The benefit of documenting the teaching learning process for sharing with parents was reinforced. The slide show served "as a graphic presentation of the dynamics of learning" (Mathews, 2006).

Final Celebrations

I was concerned with celebrating young children's everyday lives (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, 1999; Fraser, 2005). I was just as excited when Tiano, Firen and Brondon volunteered to help Shaimar when he was having difficulty on a worksheet as much as I was when Brondon got his work all correct. It was just as thrilling to hear Rhadije say that he can use his allowance to "pay Mommy to clean the house" when we discussed ways to help at home as when Parique and Shaimar were finally able to legibly write all the letters in their name in the proper order from left to right. I genuinely congratulated Jhenece for finally attempting to run during sports as I applauded her for matching the correct beginning sound to its corresponding letter. I was just as excited when Zaneil declared, "Teacher, I can write properly, now." During our school's annual sports festivities, I applauded those who won prizes, those who attempted and those who cheered for the athletes.

We were excited when Wendol eventually opened up and was comfortable enough to be the first to research about puppets. He brought the paper bag puppet he made at Summer School and shared the story with the entire class. We were just as delighted that Laurisha was no longer a loner but had found a playmate and work partner.

> Candisha: Teacher she couldn't write (draw) the teddy (bear) so I write it for her (Laurisha).
>
> Teacher-Researcher to Laurisha: Did you want her to do it?
>
> Laurisha: Yes, because she is my friend. (October 18, 2005)

It was customary to clap for each other and it was not uncommon to hear "No one clapped for me just now!" Or "where are my claps?" We were truly a celebrating close-knit community.

According to Fraser (2005), "we know that learning occurs when the learner has control over what they are learning" (p. 69). So it became one of my passions to learn more about how children experience school when they share power in the classroom. Fraser continued, "We teach best, that which we most need to learn!" (p. 69). I wanted to learn more about kindergarten children's experience of school in Montserrat. My willingness to learn alongside them helped me experience the collaboration, communication, and celebration that flourished/blossomed as a result of our co-control in the classroom community as we created a curriculum that integrated the various components of the curriculum into unique collages.

In school classrooms "the larger world is made accessible and manageable, slowed down sufficiently so that it may be held and probed in a variety of ways and personally understood" (Cuffaro, 1995, p. 71). I learned this required careful listening (Fraser, 2005, p. 56). An example was after the Christmas break, when I asked the children "How do you feel to be back at school and why? I learned that some things I thought were insignificant were important to the children.

> Parique: I am not happy because I don't like the pink on the board (bulletin). I like when it was blue.
>
> Brondon: I am sad because school stay too long to go home (long day) and you take down the black from the (bulletin board) and I can't find the blocks to play with.
>
> Y'lene: I am happy because I like to water the flowers in the classroom.
>
> Jemanie: I am happy because I get to see teacher and it was a long time I didn't get to come to school.

This reinforced for me that children understood school as more than accumulating information indicated on the formal curriculum. They needed to feel comfortable in order to make maximum benefits of the experience. I must learn to pay more attention to the emotional and social aspects of learners' development.

The Children's Exit Reflection

Ten participants completed an exit activity at the end of their first term in Grade One. For all of them, Kindergarten evoked positive sentiments. They described it as fun, happy, special, grat (great), and nas (nice). Since, for me the initial lure to be a teacher-researcher was to unearth ways to make learning more enjoyable, it was rewarding to learn Kindergarten was memorable and enjoyable. However, several children indicated they were happy for reasons I had not expected, relating, *I got stickers*; *my teacher gave me high marks*; and *I pass* (after his second year in Kindergarten). It is customary for teachers to give stickers as rewards for correctly completed work. However, probably because of my supplemented budget and the research, I was able to increase the amount of stickers given. Sometimes students were given stickers simply for trying although the work may not have been completely correct. These stickers had encouraging words that were read to the students: *Great effort; doing better*; *nice try; keep it up*. Most participants described activities they deemed pleasurable: *We were playing; I play with play dough; I was playing with blocks*. One related being happy *when I was learning.* Another wrote that he was happy when *the children was (were) behaving* and another was happy when *I was behaving.*

Stickers are normally used as rewards for good work in Monsterrat kindergartens, though the practice is not normally articulated as a behaviorist teaching strategy. It was difficult, however, to abandon certain aspects of school culture. Although efforts were made to focus more on the teaching and learning process in my kindergarten classroom, we were a part of the general population of the school where praises were mostly lavished onto end products by others including parents. Interestingly the children who were more oriented toward end products identified their sad emotions as opposites to the happy ones: *I did not get any stickers; I didn't get high marks*; for the other it was when *teacher lashed me*. Hitting children – locally called lashing – was used as a last resort and it was usually in circumstances where someone had been warned about an infraction several times before. As a consequence it was rarely used in our classroom.

In considering that the exit reflection occurred in December, months after data collection ceased, after we had a trainee teacher in our Kindergarten classroom for more than a term and after the children had already spent a term in Grade One with a teacher who regularly uses corporal punishment, one cannot be too certain that this statement was truly describing the kindergarten experience solely with this teacher-researcher. Nonetheless, I recognize that reconceptualizing teaching includes a consideration for eliminating physical punishment in school classrooms (Winter-Brathwaite, 2000). Violence between children also made the participants sad: *when the boys was (were) hit(t)ing me*; *Jakwon was fath (fighting) me*. One participant expressed herself through drawing only which I interpreted to mean when she hurt her foot and had to miss school.

Conclusion

Incorporating a child-focused approach helped to expand the emphasis of our activities from merely accomplishing learning objectives as indicated on the offical curriclum. Children and adults including the teacher, parents, guardians and other visitors to the classroom were able to work together to help each other understand various issues that confronted us in addition to acquiring the knowledge and skills stipulated in the official document. This kindergarten experience proved a learning experience not only for the children but also for all who came in contact with this project. Adults became more appreciative of the need for also promoting the emotional, social and physical development of children. Some seemed to have acquired a greater tolerance for interactive teaching learning approaches. One reader of an early draft of this dissertation commented that this approach to teaching and learning may help curb the selfishness that now permmeates our society.

The relationships children developed took centre stage. We gained considerable comfort as a class community. The children got to a point where like Reeney they could have said "member ...when I didn't even know everyone in this class? That other time got ... uh, seems like it went ... uh, somewhere else" (Paley, 1997, p.viii). Helping a friend often seemed more appealing than simply completing the teacher given tasks.

Integrating the curriculum did reduce the amount of content covered. Therefore if children's progress was measured only in terms of cognitive/intellectual development where skills and attitudes are not accredited, their performance may have not been impressive. Such a situation can be even more magnified if these students are compared to others who have been taught in traditional classrooms dominated by didactic teaching that focuses on knowledge accumulation. In such circumstances it may be inferred that the interactive learners were performing below standard when in fact they may have a deeper understanding of the concepts that cannot be easily measured by traditional achievement tests.

I was sometimes uncomfortable when the children said or did non-traditional things in the presence of other adults. One occasion when I was reading to both Kindergarten classes, I asked the children the number to dial in an emergency, 911, which I wrote on the chalkboard. We had not yet formally learned the numeral 9. We discussed how to find out what 9 was by counting from 1 on the charts around the classroom. However, when children started leaving their seats and heading to various points around the classroom I was embarrassed and said "*back to your seats*". I felt their actions signaled a weakness in my classroom management in the presence of another teacher.

Later however I wrote during reflection:

> *Why did I do that? Instead I should have been delighted to use such opportunities to demonstrate the use of charts around the classroom and point out where the charts are for those who don't know*. (January 20, 2006)

CHAPTER 6

Parting Reflections

"I do feel that we push children into formal work too early." (Broadhead, 2004, p. 13)

This statement by a Reception Year teacher from the United Kingdom challenges us to consider how we respond to the accountability requirements of our governments and society, as a whole, that are based on inappropriate standards and tests. Accountability at the early childhood level should reflect physical, emotional, social and cognitive indicators that parallel the young child's capabilities in each area. However, in many instances early childhood teachers working in school settings focus only on intellectual development. In order to ensure standards for early childhood care and education programmes are developmentally appropriate and realistic, early childhood teachers and researchers must be co-opted to play key roles as resource personnel and/or advisors when governments go about setting standards and targets.

Using indicators that rely heavily on written communication denies children opportunities to use the other means of representation within the scope of their capability. In Broadhead's (2004) view, inappropriate standards have led teachers in many instances to shortchange children. Since more child-focused teaching approaches seem counter productive using traditional measures (Oyler, 1996; Goldstein, 1998), teachers tend to continue or easily return to didactic strategies while often rejecting activities classed as play.

In this climate, a teacher's attention is diverted from the individual and collective needs of the children. Early childhood policy makers and teachers need to realize that developmentally inappropriate standards and targets are unsuitable. I believe it is therefore imperative that teachers be allowed flexibility to "interpret the curriculum in a way that suits the needs of the children" (Broadhead, 2004, p. 3). In this case study, the children appeared more interested in the process of learning with their peers and making sure they all understood and performed well than merely performing better than their friend on the tests. They provided firsthand evidence of the social construction of knowledge in action.

I regret not involving parents more in the actual classroom teaching and learning experiences. Although parents visited the classroom often and offered feedback via telephone and informal conversations wherever we met, I was unsuccessful in having any of them provide feedback via the visitors' reflections or other written forms. I regret not being able to have each parent or guardian spend at least a short time with us either to read a story or to share a skill during the academic year. It would be beneficial in a future study to concentrate more on parents' involvement in their children's schooling where a child-focused approach is used.

For most of my teaching career I have thought of myself as the main authority in the classroom, my 'palace'. Although I gave students limited rights, responsibilities and privileges it was never my intention to relinquish my power. I was never aware of the contradiction prior to reading Oyler's (1996) call to share authority in the classroom. Ultimately, however, it was the children themeselves who were most helpful in redirecting my thinking. The classroom is not my 'palace' but rather it is community property, theirs and mine, where we were required to work alongside each other.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed to improving activities relative to perusing a child-focused approach to teaching young children, particularly in schools in the Caribbean.

Administrators

Provisions should be made for teacher-educators, consultants and workshop facilitators to model a social-constructivist approach when facilitating workshops and training sessions. Simply theorizing approaches and innovations will not serve to enhance and improve the practices of pre-service and existing teachers in our early childhood environments. In modeling social-constructivist teaching approaches, that allow for teachers' active and creative participation through discussions initiated and led by them, teacher-educators will be better able to bring theory to life by "bridging the gap between theory and practice" (p. 101). Like Mroz, Smith and Hardman (2000) and Hatch (2005), I recognize that curriculum change must go beyond policy. It must also be evident at the classroom level. Changing the way teachers think about subject integration, for example, will require them to feel empowered.

Teachers

As teachers of young children, we should strive to show "empathy, genuineness, an ability to keep confidences, unconditional positive regard for students, and the ability to listen with a 'third ear'" (Greves, 2005, p. 97). We should be always open and willing to learn since there is much we can learn from our students, their parents and our colleagues. Teachers need to be always mindful of their attitudes and beliefs. Since according to Wong and Wong (2001) "it may be dangerous to teach as you were taught" (p. 28), we need to be receptive to learner focused interactive instructional approaches.

An E-mail joke with the caption, School reads: *A little girl had just finished her first week of school. "I'm just wasting my time," she said to her mother. "I can't read, I can't write and they won't let me talk!"* Sad to say this may have been a true story of a young child in a school today. I believe our aim as early childhood teachers should be to make school and learning positive experiences. As a consequence we must give children opportunities to use their most proficient modes of communicating whether it be talking, drawing, singing, dancing, writing, reading, crafting or playing to name a few. Knowing the strengths of our children will help us to promote their success. This is encouraged by playful teaching, which can also help children make connections across subject areas.

At the same time, I am mindful that didactic teaching practices in Montserratian schools are prevalent from kindergarten, thus isolated change at the kindergarten level is unlikely to make a difference in children's larger school experience. Moreover, it may make the transition from kindergarten to grade one difficult for some students. It is therefore imperative for greater communication to occur within schools using a combination of teacher-focused and child-focused strategies across the kindergarten-primary years, and between home and school using parent-focused approaches (La Paro, Piant, & Cox, 2000). As Dewey (1965) reminded us, "school is not the place where the child lives" (34). A child goes to school but lives in a home with a family as part of a community. Brandes (2005) promotes the practice of keeping parents constantly involved in their child/children's education through meaningful and respectful communication.

Parents and teachers need to work closely together to build enabling environments in which children can learn and develop to their fullest potential (Whalley, 2001).

Curriculum Designers

Curriculum refers to more than official documents listing learning outcomes. The subtle messages shared in the learning environment by teacher's actions and inactions, responses and non responses to children's questions and actions are also powerful parts of the curriculum known as the hidden curriculum. The mandated curriculum comes to life only with the teachers' and students' interaction with the subject matter and milieu thus creating an enacted or lived curriculum.

Teachers should not rely on imported reforms or approaches. Instead they should be prepared and encouraged to incorporate their own "innate creative impulses" (Greves, 2005, p. 99) to better meet the needs of their students' culture, abilities, personalities, interests and needs. No two interpretations of the same general approach should look alike. Traditionally policy makers have tended to legislate and make changes in schools based on what they think is effective without consulting the teachers who must effect the change.

Fullan (1996) wrote that it is usually harder to "get things to happen on the ground level" (p. 496). It is not simply about changing appearance and actions but changing a philosophy or culture. Smith, Hardman, Wall and Mroz (2004) stress that "teachers need extended opportunities to think through new ideas and to try out new practices, ideally in a context where they get feedback from a more expert practitioner and continue to refine their practice in collaboration with colleagues" (p. 409). Teachers too need to be involved in the collaborative construction of knowledge. Successful change must be gradual and as Fullan (2000) acknowledges can take several years to manifest in student performance. The National Literacy Strategy's website, in a message to Head Teachers, teachers, governors and LEA staff, advised: "It is important that children have a rich and exciting experience at primary school, learning a wide range of things in a wide range of different ways" (StandardsSite, 2003). In other words effective teachers are expected to use a variety of strategies during teaching and learning activities. Glasser (1990) went further when he emphasized that any teaching strategy that does not take into account the needs of students and teachers must fail.

Implications for Further Study

Crosser (2005) challenges us to consider "that what we say we know today may be viewed as a misconception tomorrow … [it is a teacher's] obligation to continuously seek out, evaluate, and be open to new research findings" (p.31). Teachers are therefore encouraged to become critical consumers of research, and researchers themselves. A longitudinal study involving teacher-researchers tracking the effects of a child-focused approach in a Montserratian school context would be particularly relevant. It would also be valuable to undertake research concerning child-focused approaches with teachers in the early years of schooling beyond kindergarten. A study investigating the effects of communication and collaboration during testing situations in kindergarten and grade one could also shed light on its relation to curriculum integration.

This is Not the End

"Putting children at the center allows everything to come together naturally" (Wilford, 2006, p. 15).

With children as the focus, interaction and collaboration are inevitable. Through interacting and collaborating with the teacher, other students, parents and indeed the community it has been found that a "student's interest and motivation can be stimulated and maintained" (Markett, Arnedillo-Sanchez, Weber and Tangney, 2006, p. 282). Early childhood teachers should therefore commit the time and energy necessary to promote interaction and collaboration involving parents and other members of the school or wider community based on the interests and desires of the students.

A greater level of interaction also contributes to students' co-control in the classroom, allowing "students to build their learning environment and influence the learning process, leading to more active learning while providing instructors (teachers) with ongoing feedback" (Markett, et al., 2006, p. 283). In an interactive learning environment teachers can lessen the heavy reliance on cumulative tests as the continuous feedback through the various modes of interacting will indicate if and when reinforcement and/or remediation are necessary.

I am comforted by the fact that I need not see this dissertation as the end of my journey. Rather it can and should serve as an avenue for initiating conversation with my co-workers, parents, the wider community, and policy makers which may lead to the eventual reconceptualizing of the story of early childhood teaching and learning in Montserrat. In the words of Clandinin and Connelly (1998), "the promise of storytelling emerges when we move beyond regarding a story as a fixed entity and engage in conversations with our stories" (p. 251) and the stories of others as well.

As highlighted in the background review in Montserrat, "the primary education sector focuses on the teaching and learning environment and strengthening the adoption of an outcomes-focused learning culture" (Ministry of Education, 2004). The dominant view is therefore one in which schooling aims to produce children with particular knowledge at a specific standard by a designated time. It is my intention to use the story of this experience as a starting point for dialogue provoking other ways of thinking. This dialogue has already begun as on numerous occasions I have been asked about the project and its progress. A major milestone was presenting a paper at the Montserrat Early Childhood Association's general meeting in 2006. The meeting was attended by a variety of stakeholders including parents, educators from daycare to tertiary, education administrators, health practitioners, business owners and journalists. My presentation was captioned: 'What is play?' In it I looked at definitions for play, the importance of play in education especially of the young child, the role of the adult in play and current barriers/hindrances for play's use in our classrooms. Three of my kindergarten students accompanied me to demonstrate play's educational value to the audience. As a result of this presentation I was a guest on a radio talk show where the importance of play was once again the topic. Again in July, 2006 I was a guest discussing prevention of sexual abuse among infants. I was also consulted earlier in the year to assist with the preparation of a work book to commemorate Caribbean Nutrition Day in June 2006. A few of my co-workers have found time in their busy schedule to read drafts which resulted in some enlightening discussions. It is clear that the community is becoming more aware of the importance and the need to discuss issues pertaining to our children.

I hope to make early childhood teaching in Montserrat more visible in a school culture in which it receives little attention. I agree with Dr. Maureen Samms-Vaughan, an early childhood advocate from Jamaica, who wrote:

> I have listened keenly to the recent discussions about the performance of schools, and I put it to you, that while school administration and infrastructure do play their role in impacting on a child's performance, the CXC (Caribbean Examination Council) outcome of the children involved in that study were determined more strongly by the events occurring in their lives long before they started high school. The impact of early childhood years does not end at primary school. (2004, p. 27)

This dissertation provided a snapshot of experience with potential "to (re)construct identity, community and traditions" (Casey, 1996, p. 216) of teaching and learning in a kindergarten in Montserrat. Through the stories gathered from the children, the voices of often unheard young learners were amplified. It is anticipated that this account of child-focused teaching and learning will serve as an impetus to improve early childhood experiences in kindergarten classrooms in Montserrat.

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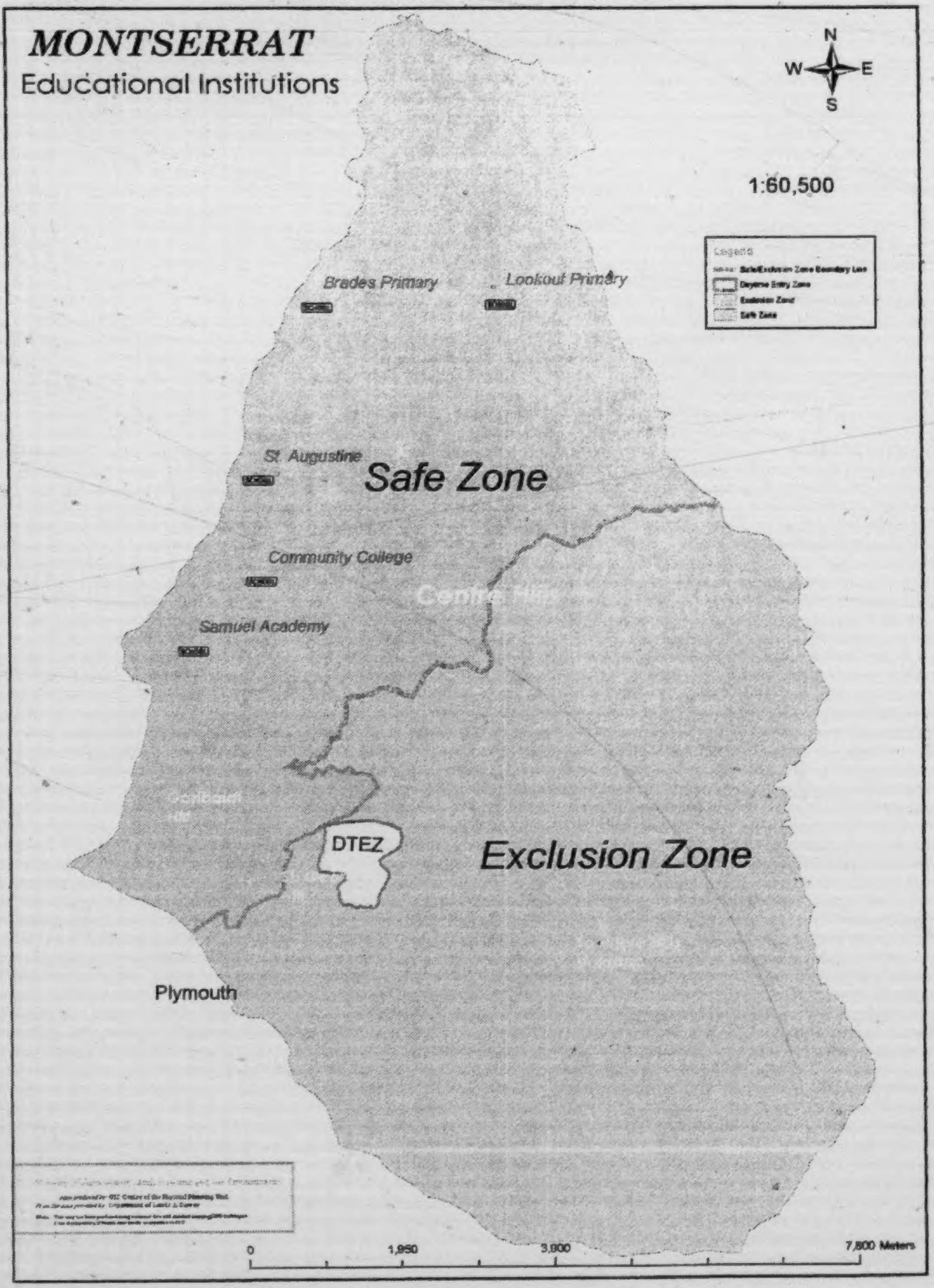
Appendices

APPENDIX A

Montserrat Educational Institutions

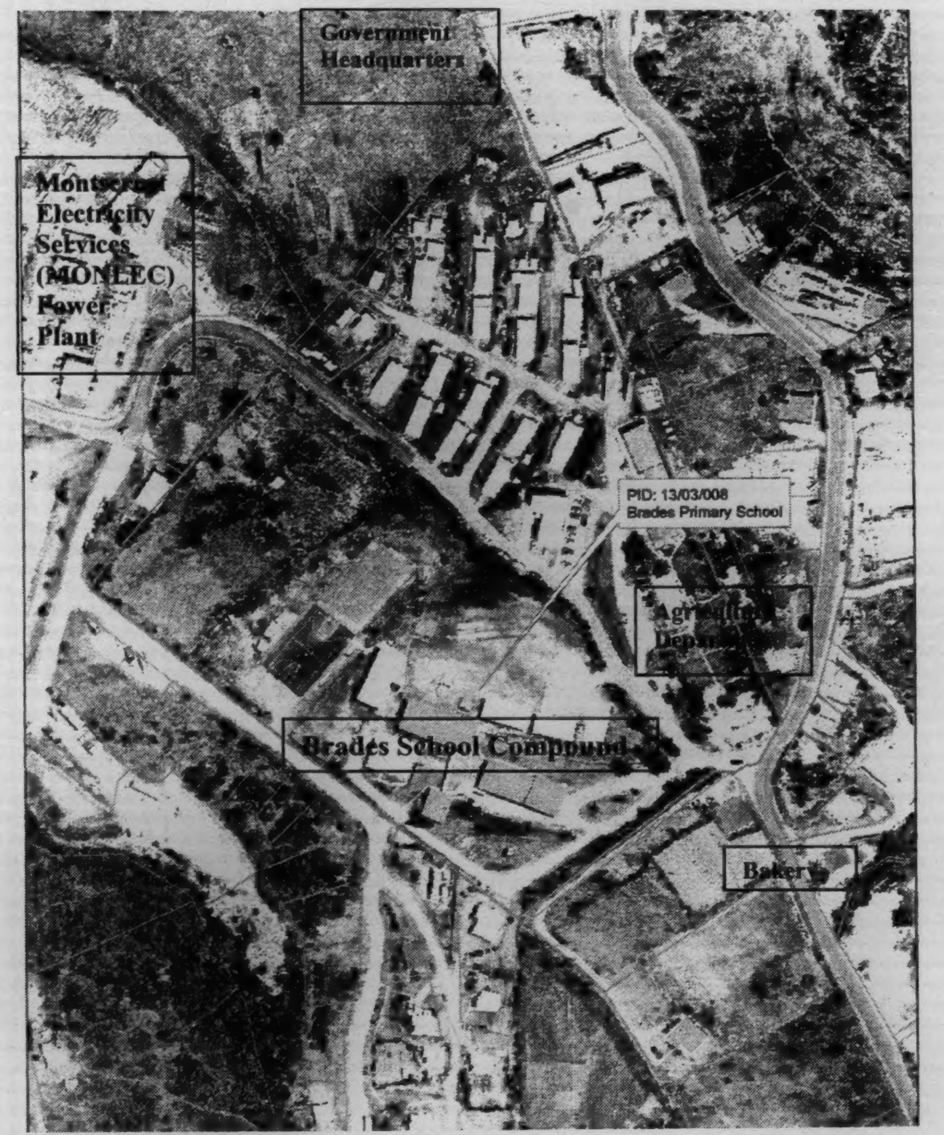
Montserrat Educational Institutions


MONTSERRAT
Educational Institutions
N
W
E
S
1:60,500
Legend
Safe/Exclusion Zone Boundary Line
Daytime Entry Zone
Exclusion Zone
Safe Zone
Brades Primary
Lookout Primary
St. Augustine
Safe Zone
Community College
Centre Hills
Samuel Academy
DTEZ
Exclusion Zone
Plymouth
Map produced by GIS Centre of the Physical Planning Unit
0
1,950
3,900
7,800 Meters

APPENDIX B

Brades School Compound

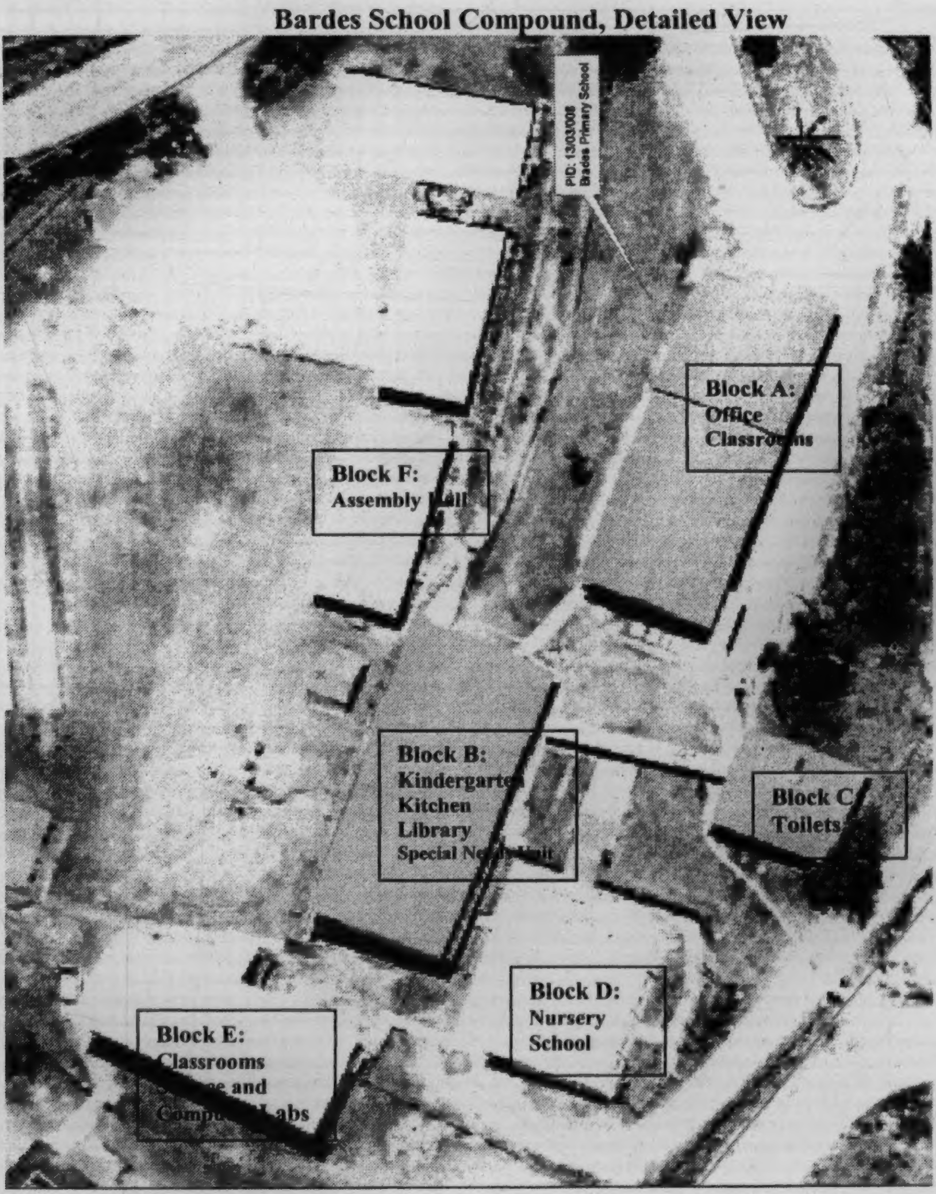
Brades School Compound


Government Headquarters
Montserrat Electricity Services (MONLEC) Power Plant
PID: 13/03/008
Brades Primary School
Agriculture Department
Brades School Compound
Bakery

APPENDIX C

Brades School Compound, Detailed View

Bardes School Compound, Detailed View


PID: 13/03/008
Bardes Primary School
Block A:
Office
Classrooms
Block F:
Assembly Hall
Block B:
Kindergarten
Kitchen
Library
Special Needs Unit
Block C:
Toilets
Block D:
Nursery
School
Block E:
Classrooms
Science and
Computer Labs

APPENDIX D

Information Letters to Parent and Student

Awe Nook
Judy Piece
Montserrat.
sheronb@ualberta.ca / sheburns@hotmail.com

June 2, 2005

Dear Miss Eel and Mr Repmes,

I have always wondered how many students were turned off or on to learning because of the way they experienced learning under my guidance as an infant teacher. In my search for ways to be of utmost assistance to young children in my classroom I applied for study leave and enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of Alberta in Canada with the assistance of a Commonwealth Scholarship. I have completed the required courses and will be conducting a study during the next school year.

How do children in a kindergarten classroom in Montserrat experience learning when the subjects are integrated using a variety of teaching strategies? This will be the central question guiding my study. The answer to this question should assist me to better cater not only to children's intellectual development but also to their social, physical, moral and psychological development.

Your child, Jhenece, has been registered in the class to which I have been assigned. This letter is therefore to request your permission for your child to participate in the study. You are not obligated to grant permission as all children registered will be taught in exactly the same way. However, permission is necessary in order to collect, keep, record and analyze samples of your child's work that will assist me in understanding how they experience schooling and learning. These will include scribbles, drawings, photos or artifacts made by your child. I also need your permission to

- photograph and
- audio or video tape some classroom activities and conversations for in depth out of class reflection.

If you do not wish for your child to participate, work samples or conversations will only be used for classroom assessment and not for my study. If you agree at this time you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime without penalty during before the end of the study.

As your child's representative you will be invited to read and discuss summaries of my field notes and journal reflections as I identify emerging themes, contradictions and interpretations. You will also have the opportunity to be involved in negotiating representation in the preliminary analysis and will be informed of the variety of ways the research texts (including photos) will be communicated and shared within the educational community. The foremost usage will be the preparation of my doctoral dissertation/thesis which is in answer to the question as stated before.

In adhering to the Standards for Ethical Research at the University of Alberta and the Ministry of Education and taking in to account the compactness of the community while conducting this study, I request that you assist your child to choose a pseudonym.

In addition I will refrain from using information that will lead to easy identification in presentations, papers and publications. You will be notified of presentations, papers and publications and upon request a copy will be made available to you. Field notes, photos, tapes of conversations and all other data will be kept in a secure location by me and will only be shared with professors on my supervisory committee at the University of Alberta.

For further information and/or clarification about this project and my request, please contact me in person by email or by telephone at 491 -6311. If you are giving permission for your child to participate, without coercing please assist your child to read and sign the attached consent form and return to the Head Teacher by September 1, 2005.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Faculties of Education and Extension at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta at 1 780 492 3751 or the Director of Education, Miss Kathleen Greenaway in the Ministry of Education.

Thank you for assistance and anticipated co-operation.

………
Sheron

Information Letter to Student

September 6, 2005

Dear _____,

I am Teacher Burns, and I will be your Kindergarten teacher. I am also going to school in Canada where I am learning how to be a better teacher. This year although I am here at home and teaching I have homework to do. I need your help to do my homework to take back to my school in Canada.

I want you to let me keep or copy some of the work you will be doing in class. Sometimes, I would also like to tape (audio and video) and take pictures of us while we work in class. These will help other teachers and me to understand how you and other children like you learn. This can help us to make school and learning better and more fun for you.

If your Mommy or Daddy says yes, and you also want me to keep your work and write about you in my homework, please write your name. Before I take any of your work for my homework I will ask you again and you can also choose to say no at that time.

Thank you very much!

See you in class!!!

....

Teacher Burns

[redacted]

APPENDIX E

Research Consent Form for Students

Research Consent form for Students

I, ……………, agree to be

- audio taped ☐
- video taped ☐
- photographed ☐

for Teacher (Sheron) Burns to use in her homework (study).

I also agree to

- Let Teacher Burns keep some examples or copies of my writings, drawings, crafts and photographs that I do during school.

I understand that:

- I may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty by telling you or asking Mommy or Daddy to tell you, Teacher Burns
- all information gathered will be treated confidentially and discussed only with Teacher Burns' university teachers
- any information that identifies me will be destroyed upon completion of this research
- I will not be identifiable in any documents resulting from this research

I also understand that the results of this research will be used in scholarly and professional publications, presentations and Teacher Sheron Burns' doctoral dissertation at the University of Alberta.

…………………………………… ……………………………………

Student's name Parent's signature

Address:

____

Telephone: __________________ E-Mail: ______________________

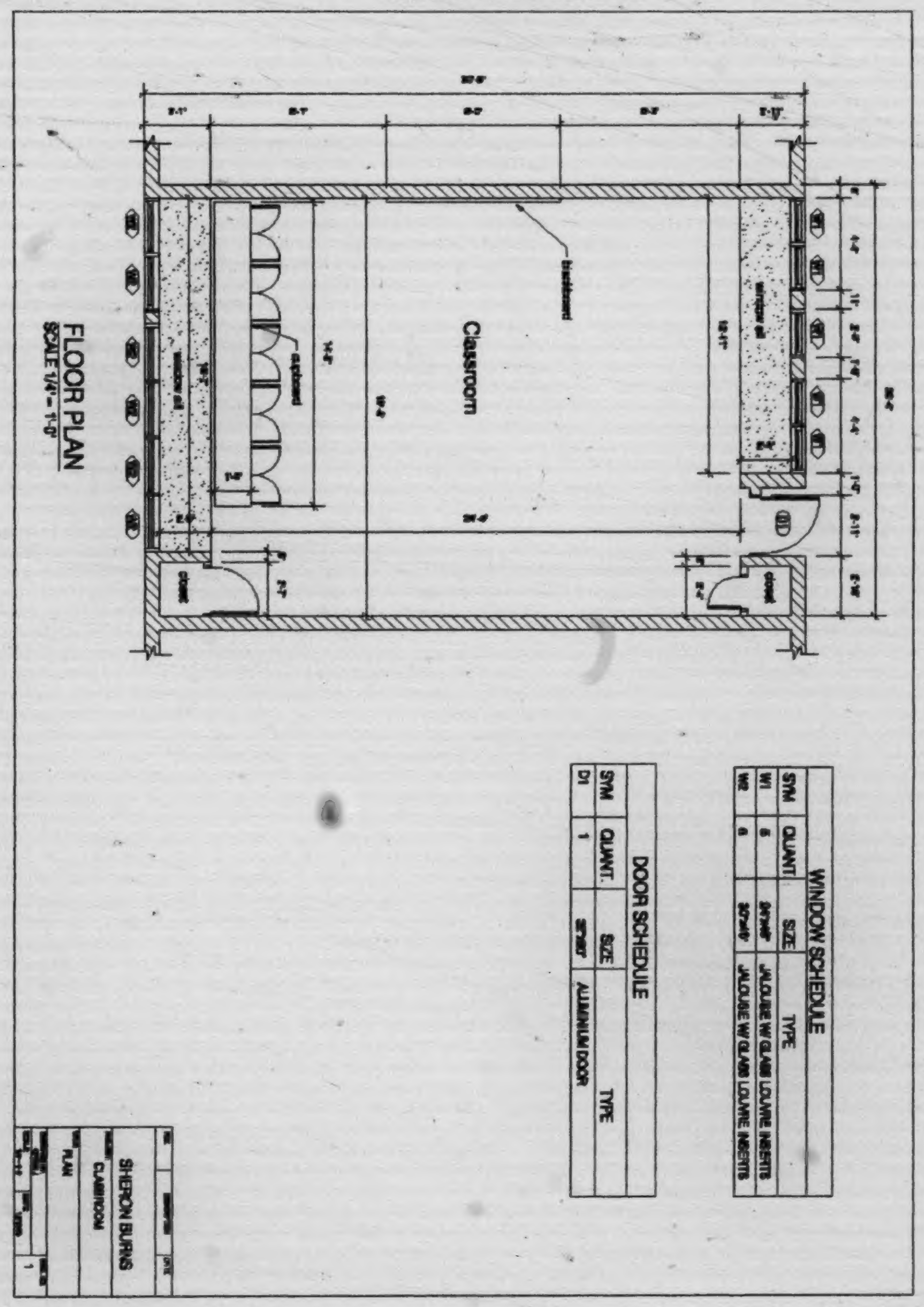
Date signed: ___________________________

For further information or clarification please contact me, Sheron.
Return completed forms by September 1, 2005.

APPENDIX F

Classroom Floor Plan

Classroom Floor Plan


Classroom
cupboard
window sill
closet
FLOOR PLAN
SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0"
WINDOW SCHEDULE
SYM
QUANT.
SIZE
TYPE
W1
6
JALOUSIE W/ GLASS LOUVRE INSERTS
W2
6
JALOUSIE W/ GLASS LOUVRE INSERTS
DOOR SCHEDULE
SYM
QUANT.
SIZE
TYPE
D1
1
ALUMINIUM DOOR
SHERON BURNS
CLASSROOM
PLAN
1

APPENDIX G

Extent for September, 2005

Extent for September, 2005

Language Arts

- show a willingness to take part in class activities involving oral work.
- read letters that represent the sounds a – z
- identify word boundaries
- listen to stories read to them
- talk about stories, poems, rhymes, read to them
- listen attentively in conversation and read aloud sessions and respond appropriately
- identify their own name in print
- talk about the weather, news and current affairs
- name body parts
- identify rhyming words and make up rhyming words and patterns
- pronounce words in their repertoire as clearly as they can
- identify various sounds and associate them with their origin
- identify and differentiate between sounds made by specific/selected objects in the environment
- Differentiate between sounds that are soft/loud, far/near, gentle/harsh, etc.
- high sounds, low sounds, scary sounds
- write letters that represent the sounds a – z
- name the letters and state the sounds for Bb, Cc, Dd
- identify and state words beginning with the sounds /b/, /c/, /d/
- identify objects/pictures with the sounds /b/, /c/, /d/
- speak in a forthright manner
- show a positive attitude in sessions organized to practice the use of standard English
- use different sentence patterns of English in oral presentations
- Follow simple oral instructions and directions
- Ask questions to elicit information
- Listen courteously in conversational exchanges and respond courteously
- Express opinions about stories/ poems/ topics of interest
- Show a willingness to express ideas and opinions
- Use words appropriately to express ideas and feelings
- Give information in response to questions asked
- Talk about subjects that are of interest to them
- Name things they see in pictures
- Draw picture(s) to express thoughts and ideas
- Trace over patterns
- Imitate writing
- Make straight strokes in three lines
- Writing own names
- Retell favourite and familiar stories

- Show pleasure in and respond to stories, poems etc.
- Talk about the stories, rhymes, poems that are read to them
- Listen to and show their enjoyment of songs, poetry etc
- Learn new rhymes

Mathematics

- name days of the week
- identify current day and month
- use time vocabulary appropriately: today, yesterday, tomorrow, now, morning, afternoon, later
- classify objects into sets by colour, size, shape etc
- Describe attributes of objects using words such as round, straight, flat curved etc
- Use three dimensional shapes to build objects for example houses, rockets etc

Science

- earth, space and time
- observe different types of weather: sunny, cloudy, rainy, windy, ashy
- name some living and non living things
- classify living and non living things based on various attributes such as uses and size
- identify and describe objects according to colour, size, shape, texture

Social Studies

- Myself – name, age, where live etc
- My family – living together, sharing, caring, loving
- Mother and father (parents), male female, son, daughter, brother, sister
- Other family members – aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins

Art and Craft

- Colouring selected handouts
- Cutting and pasting
- Drawing and colouring objects/characters from stories and other subjects areas
- Creating patterns and designs with crayons and paint

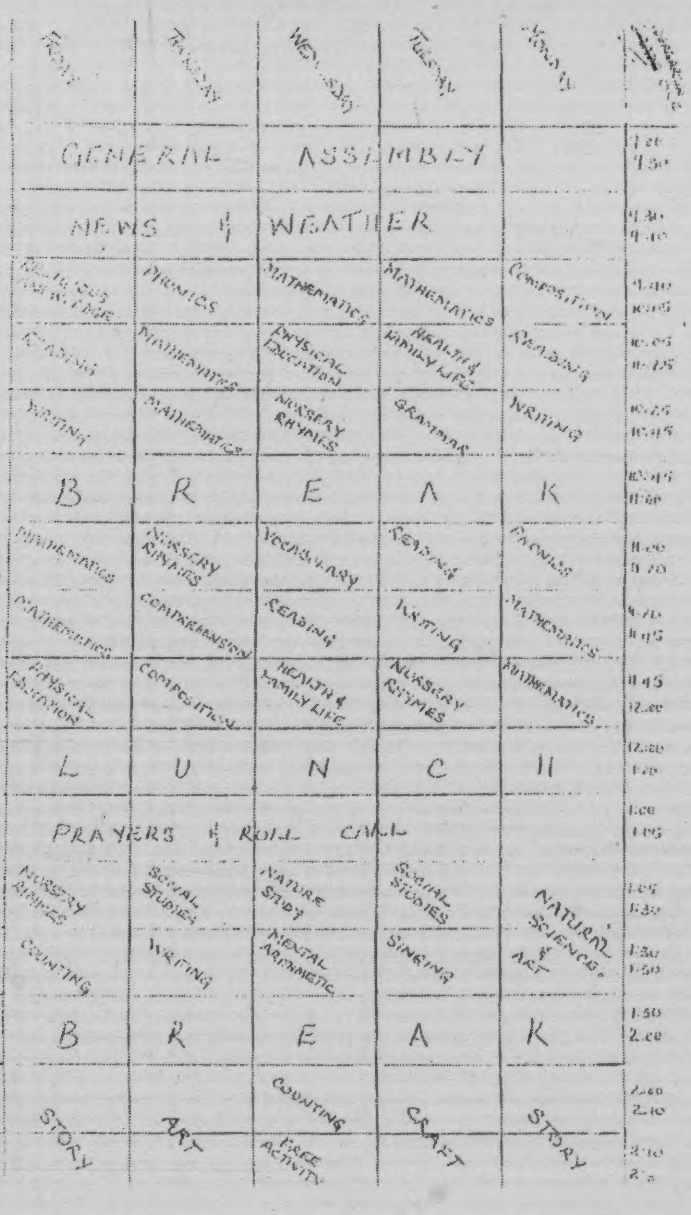
Music

- sing rhymes, jingles and other songs
- making rhythm – clapping hands, stamping feet
- use of shakers, triangles
- learning new songs

APPENDIX H

Sample Timetable Reflecting Subject Segmentation

Sample Timetable Reflecting Subject Segmentation



FRIDAY	THURSDAY	WEDNESDAY	TUESDAY	MONDAY	[illegible]
GENERAL ASSEMBLY					9.00 9.30
NEWS & WEATHER					9.30 9.40
RELIGIOUS [illegible]	PHONICS	MATHEMATICS	MATHEMATICS	COMPOSITION	9.40 10.05
READING	MATHEMATICS	PHYSICAL EDUCATION	HEALTH & FAMILY LIFE	READING	10.05 10.25
WRITING	MATHEMATICS	NURSERY RHYMES	GRAMMAR	WRITING	10.25 10.45
B	R	E	A	K	10.45 11.00
MATHEMATICS	NURSERY RHYMES	VOCABULARY	READING	PHONICS	11.00 11.20
MATHEMATICS	COMPREHENSION	READING	WRITING	MATHEMATICS	11.20 11.45
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	COMPOSITION	HEALTH & FAMILY LIFE	NURSERY RYMES	MATHEMATICS	11.45 12.00
L	U	N	C	H	12.00 1.00
PRAYERS & ROLL CALL					1.00 1.05
NURSERY RHYMES	SOCIAL STUDIES	NATURE STUDY	SOCIAL STUDIES	NATURAL SCIENCE & ART	1.05 1.30
COUNTING	WRITING	MENTAL ARITHMETIC	SINGING		1.30 1.50
B	R	E	A	K	1.50 2.00
STORY	ART	COUNTING	CRAFT	STORY	2.00 2.10
		FREE ACTIVITY			2.10 2.[illegible]

APPENDIX I

Sample Timetable Including the Literacy Hour

Sample Timetable Including the Literacy Hour.

BPS: MODIFIED TIMETABLE TO ACCOMMODATE LITERACY HOUR

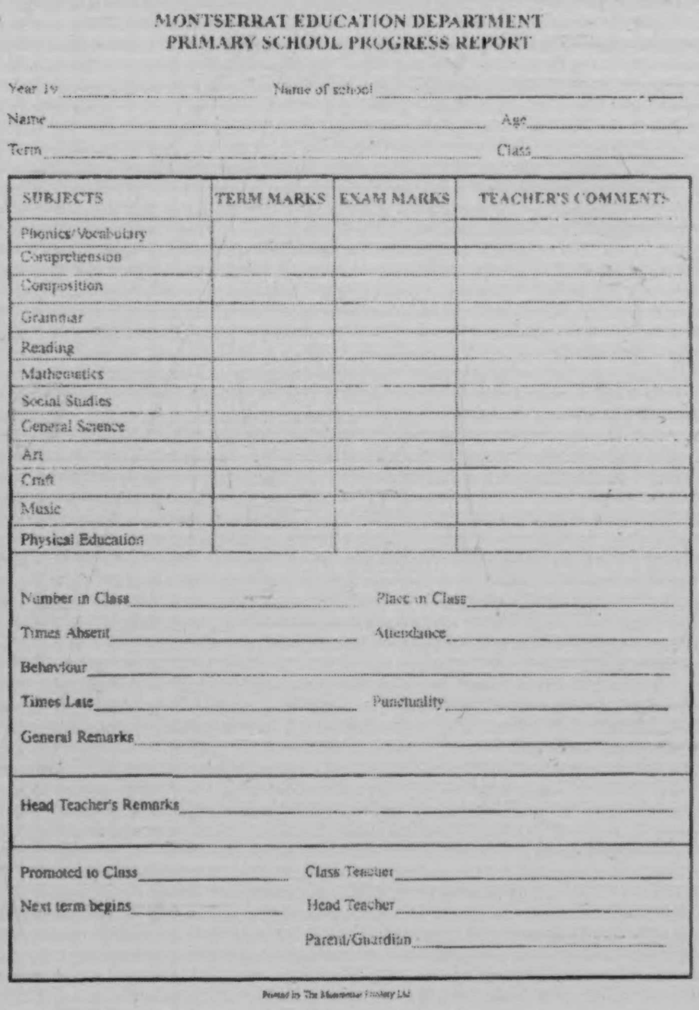
LOWER SCHOOL - GRADE K

TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
9:00 - 9:15	ASSEMBLY				
9:15 - 9:45	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
9:45 - 10:45	Literacy Hour	Literacy Hour	Literacy Hour	Literacy Hour	Literacy Hour
10:45 - 11:00	BREAK				
11:00 - 12:00	Numeracy	Numeracy	Numeracy	Numeracy	Numeracy
12:00 - 1:00	LUNCH				
1:00 - 1:30	Science (H)	Music	Sports	Social Studies	Science (N)
1:30 - 1:50	Writing	Music	Sports	Writing	Oral Skills
1:50 - 2:00	BREAK				
2:00 - 2:30	Poetry	Social Studies	Science (N)	Art	Poetry
2:30 - 3:00	Spelling	Word Games	Free Activity	Craft	Free Activity
	DISMISSAL				

APPENDIX J

Report Cards Used Prior to Academic Year 2001-2002

Report Cards Used Prior to Academic-Year 2001 – 2002



MONTSERRAT EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
PRIMARY SCHOOL PROGRESS REPORT

Year 19 ______________ Name of school ______________
Name ______________ Age ______________
Term ______________ Class ______________

SUBJECTS	TERM MARKS	EXAM MARKS	TEACHER'S COMMENTS
Phonics/Vocabulary			
Comprehension			
Composition			
Grammar			
Reading			
Mathematics			
Social Studies			
General Science			
Art			
Craft			
Music			
Physical Education			

Number in Class ______________ Place in Class ______________
Times Absent ______________ Attendance ______________
Behaviour ______________
Times Late ______________ Punctuality ______________
General Remarks ______________

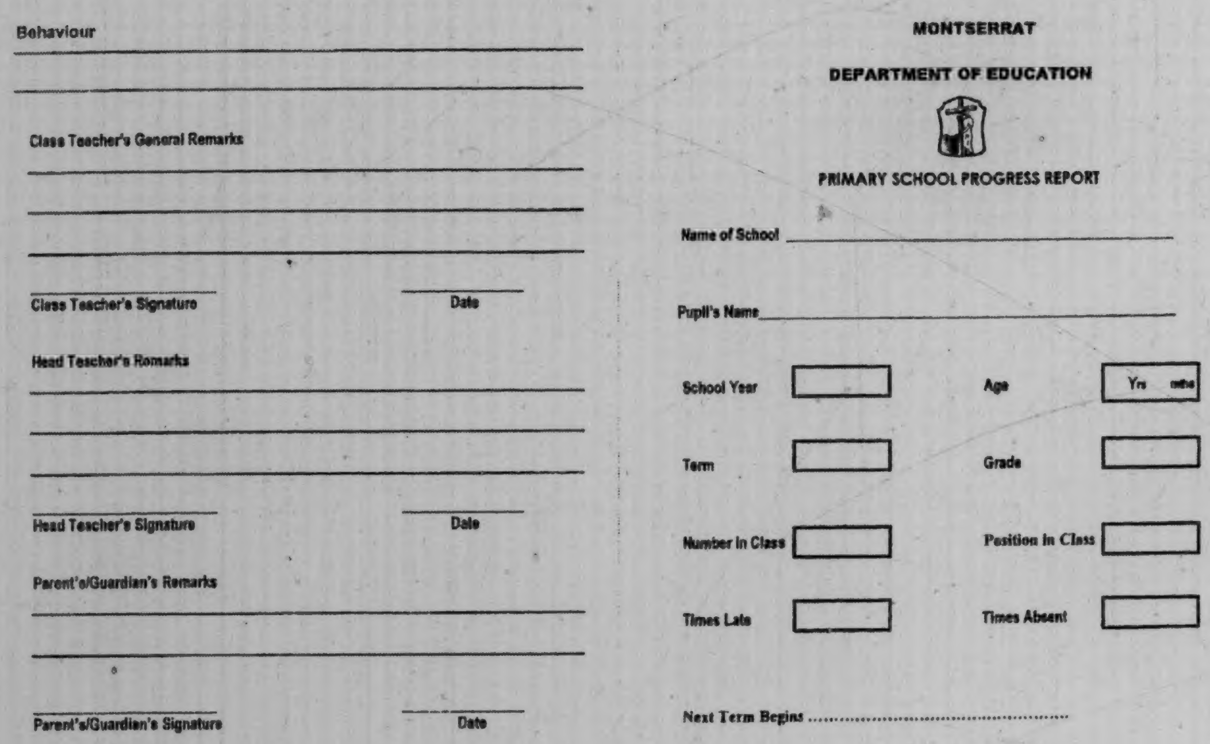
Head Teacher's Remarks ______________

Promoted to Class ______________ Class Teacher ______________
Next term begins ______________ Head Teacher ______________
Parent/Guardian ______________

APPENDIX K

Report Cards Used from Academic Year 2002-2003

Report Cards Used From Academic Year 2002 – 2003



MONTSERRAT

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PRIMARY SCHOOL PROGRESS REPORT

Name of School ____________________

Pupil's Name ____________________

School Year	☐	Age	Yrs mths
Term	☐	Grade	☐
Number in Class	☐	Position in Class	☐
Times Late	☐	Times Absent	☐

Next Term Begins ....

Behaviour ____________________

Class Teacher's General Remarks ____________________

Class Teacher's Signature ____________ Date ____________

Head Teacher's Remarks ____________________

Head Teacher's Signature ____________ Date ____________

Parent's/Guardian's Remarks ____________________

Parent's/Guardian's Signature ____________ Date ____________

Class Teacher's Remarks on Pupil's Performance in Core Areas

Term	Exam

Mathematics

Term	Exam

Language Arts

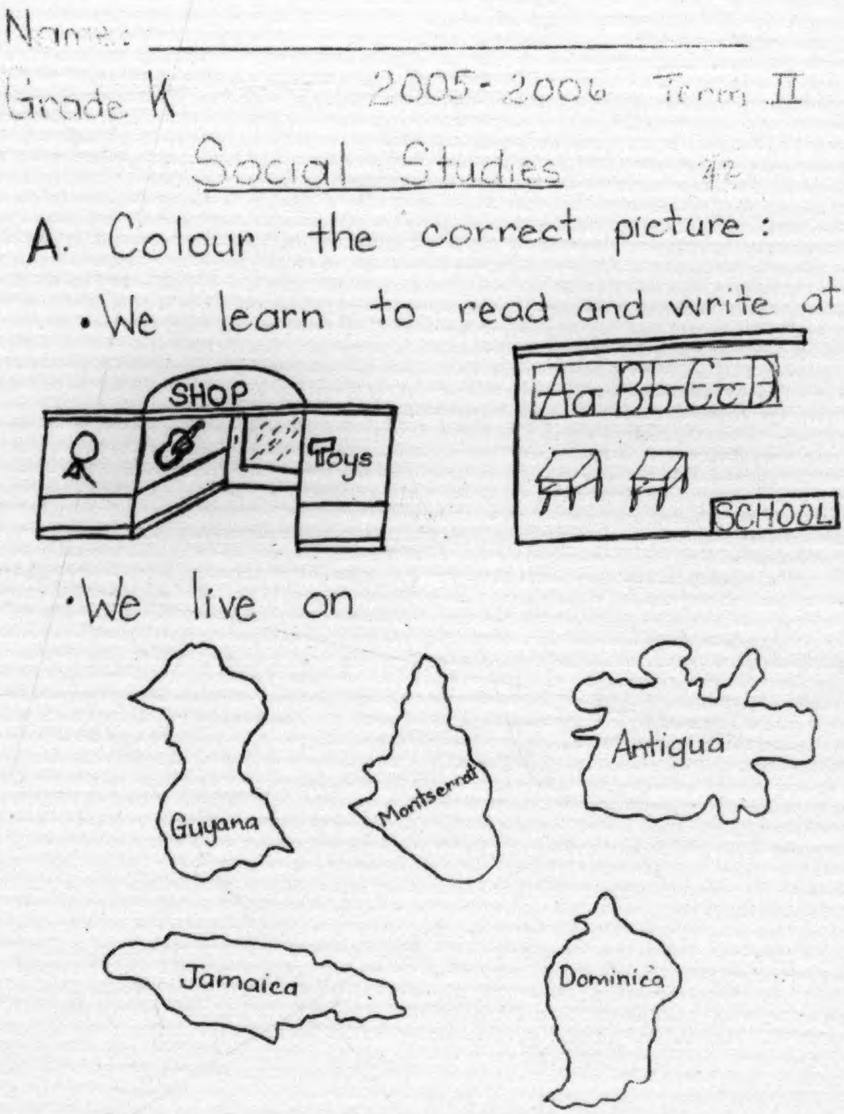
Science

Social Studies

APPENDIX L

Excerpts from End of Term II Test, March 2006

Excerpt from End of Term II Test, March 2006



Name: ______________________________

Grade K 2005-2006 Term II

Social Studies 42

A. Colour the correct picture:

- We learn to read and write at

SHOP
Toys
Aa Bb Cc D
SCHOOL

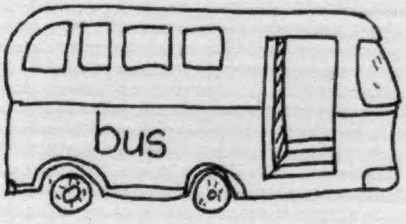
- We live on

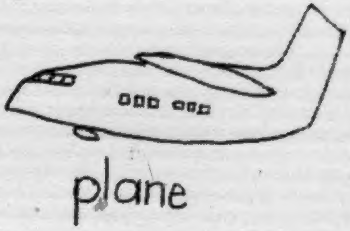
Guyana
Montserrat
Antigua
Jamaica
Dominica

Name: ____________________

Social Studies

. We can go to Antigua in a





______ . ______ . ______ . ______ . ______

B. Circle the correct word.

① Our school is in

Salem Brades

② The Head Teacher is

Mr. Julius Mr. Allen

③ Miss Ellen and Miss Nan work in the

Library Lunch room